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MY FIRST TWO THOUSAND YEARS

Uncensored abridgment by the authors

GEORGE SYLVESTER VIERECK
AND PAUL ELDRIDGE

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HE COULD NOT DIE, NOR EVER GROW OLD. LOVE WAS HIS, DOWN THE CENTURIES AND IN MANY LANDS...

"Audacious and magnificent"
–Thomas Mann

LOVES BEYOND COUNT

"Thou shalt tarry until I return" . . .

. . . and for two thousand years Isaac waited for the Lord's return. Cynical and sad, he wandered the face of the earth, treading wearily down the centuries.

Though he was wiser than the wisest, and richer than the richest, he found no contentment. Though he learned the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged, he knew no pleasure. Though he knew all faiths and witnessed all forms of worship, neither the purest of beliefs nor the indescribable orgies of the Black Mass could give him solace.

Though his loves were beyond count, each of them meant only torture . . . for all the world could grow old and die, while he remained to mourn forever.

THE CREST IMPRINT ON OUTSTANDING BOOKS IS YOUR GUARANTEE OF INFORMATIVE AND ENTERTAINING READING

UNCENSORED ABRIDGMENT BY THE AUTHORS

My First Two Thousand Years

BY

GEORGE SYLVESTER VIERECK

AND

PAUL ELDRIDGE

A CREST REPRINT

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To

Gretchen and Sylvette

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FROM THE REVIEWS

"You would think that anybody might, in two thousand years, grow weary of trying to solve the riddle of life through sexual orgies, especially if, along about the middle of the fourth century of it, a Chinese adept had taught him two hundred and eighty secrets of love. But not Cartaphilus . . . Undeniably an enormous achievement."

—RICHMOND (VA.) NEWS LEADER

". . . a work that must not be measured by ordinary standards . . . It will be read and thoroughly enjoyed by any lover of good fiction no less than by him who has a preference for history and biography."

—NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

". . . As a work of creative imagination, Mr. Viereck and Mr. Eldridge have written a fascinatingly unique and alluring story. It is done with a spareness of words that sometimes approaches the beauty of the Greeks . . . In summing up the book . . . it is the story one remembers."

—CHICAGO TRIBUNE

". . . an unusually good story . . . some readers will detect a slight suspicion of Kraft-Ebbing; our respectable ancestors would have burned the book —and perhaps the authors—with a clear conscience. But a good many moderns will read it with enthusiasm."

—RICHMOND (VA.) TIMES-DISPATCH

". . . too colossal, too powerful, too broad in scope to be tarnished by the tired adjectives of reviewers . . . No detail is left untold; no intimacy is too delicate to go unrelated . . . A great work."

—DETROIT FREE PRESS

I

PROLOGUE

MOUNT ATHOS

1. THE SEVEN PLOVERS

The sun hurled spears of fire at the golden cross crowning the marble peak of Mount Athos.

Suddenly the flaming glory was darkened by the shadows of seven black-breasted plovers hovering for a moment, as if in deliberation, over the ivy-crowned tower of the monastery, and vanishing with a shrill cry.

"What an unearthly sound!" exclaimed Aubrey Lowell.

"Their screams," remarked his companion, a German of colossal stature, "echo the sounds of the battlefields over which they have flown."

"It is incomprehensible to me by what subterranean channels the Holy Fathers keep in touch with the outside world, in times such as these," Aubrey remarked.

Their ears caught the rustling of wings overhead. Once more a shadow flitted over the landscape.

"What is that?" asked Basil Bassermann.

"Plovers—seven plovers. This is the second time they have flown over the belfry."

"You counted them?"

"Yes, and I counted seven," Aubrey remarked. "The very atmosphere admits of no other number."

"Superstition is a form of atavism to which all minds are subject. Even my blood," Professor Bassermann conceded somewhat ponderously, "feels the dust of ages rising from all these ancient objects."

"What a confession for the foremost scientist of Harvard!" Aubrey taunted the old professor. "You know I have studied the history of superstition a little. There is an ancient story about seven plovers. The seven soldiers who assisted at the crucifixion were transformed into plovers, doomed to circle the sky forever."

"Perhaps it means that we shall never get our visa," Professor Bassermann remarked with a wry face. "We are both tired and overwrought from travel. There is a tension in the air which affects even me. Surely, of all places, this must be the very hotbed of superstition. Very likely your seven fowls presage some mysterious visitor or some startling event. While we are chatting aimlessly, the belligerents are upsetting the map of Europe."

"The peak on which we are standing has seen many revolutions of the wheel of fate. If only," Aubrey remarked dreamily, "the rock could speak, what marvelous tales it could unfold!"

"Meanwhile we must depend upon annals written by man," Bassermann dryly insisted.

"Man could tell more than the stone if he were able to release the race memory that survives in the primordial cell. Forever dividing, but never perishing, it is his nearest approach to immortality."

"I am afraid, my dear Aubrey, that is a task that even your master Freud would hardly dare undertake. But we don't need psychoanalysis to tell us that all religions and superstitions from remotest antiquity merge in this remarkable promontory."

Both were too much engrossed in their conversation to notice the approach of Father Ambrose. They were startled when a deep melodious voice, giving to the English something of the honeyed inflexion of Homer's heroes, replied: "That is the mountain where Christ was tempted."

Father Ambrose crossed himself in the Greek fashion from right to left as he uttered the holy name.

Professor Bassermann eyed the old monk curiously, making some mental notes for his next book on the psychology of faith.

"By the way, Father Ambrose," he questioned, "what is your version of the story of the seven plovers? What is it they foretell?"

Father Ambrose did not answer. In spite of the balmy

weather, he drew his garments closer around his body. He shuddered and made the sign of the cross once more.

In a trice, without warning, the face of nature grew sullen. Like black, angry mouths, the clouds swallowed up the sun. The air was dense with suppressed excitement. The wind howled through the long corridors and sobbed and whispered in the secret recesses of the cells. The chime of the vesper bell flowed out into the infinite.

Suddenly a terrific clap of thunder smote the sky. Rain came down like a cataract. Flashes of lightning chased one another like battling fiery dragons. The bells jangled hideously out of tune. Unearthly noises, like a satanic parody of the holy sound that marks the elevation of the host, alarmed the ears of the horrified monks. It was as if a high priest had suddenly gone mad in the midst of a sacred ceremony and interspersed the Lord's Prayer with unspeakable blasphemies.

Trembling, but resolute, Father Ambrose seized a crucifix. In phalanx, as if for battle, the brethren followed him. Solemn, with gleaming eyes and trembling nostrils, the militant army of God swept up steep stairs mumbling the ritual of the exorcism. Infected somewhat by the general hysteria, Aubrey followed. Professor Bassermann alone measured the situation with critical calm.

In the steeple the army paused. Father Ambrose stepped forward. "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." The monks crossed themselves. "If the spirits of the damned have entered, I bid them depart into the air whence they have come. He that has bound the Devil, shall He not vanquish his breed? In the thrice-blessed name of Jesus Christ our Lord, I bid thee get hence, Satan!"

The Holy Prior continued to challenge the Evil One, and the holy fathers chanted the ancient hymns of the Church. The infernal artillery in the skies surrendered at last. The sun aureoled the sky once more.

In the blinding glare of the lightning and the final crash of the thunderclap, unnoticed by anyone, a stranger had entered the monastery.

2. MR. ISAAC LAQUEDEM

Toward six o'clock the evening repast was served in a large rectangular hall. Preceded by Father Ambrose, sixty monks filed into the hall, taking their accustomed seats at the table. Professor Bassermann and Aubrey Lowell occupied the seats of honor at the side of Father Ambrose. The former, calm, critical, undisturbed by the occurrences of the day, made additional mental memoranda for a new essay on religious hysteria, to be inscribed upon the cylinders of the Dictograph which accompanied him on all his journeys. Aubrey's nerves, however, were still a-tingle. Father Ambrose had informed him of a new arrival, a traveler from afar, who had also sought refuge in the monastery from the uncertainties of the World War, bringing excellent credentials from the prime ministers of several Balkan states and from Russia.

The newcomer was expected for the evening meal. He did not appear, however, until after the first course had been served. Then a tall young man, evidently a gentleman of leisure, with black hair neatly parted and large melancholy eyes, seated himself at the table.

"Mr. Laquedem," Father Ambrose introduced the stranger to his American guests.

Aubrey and Bassermann studied the newcomer. Mr. Laquedem was a man of uncertain age. At the first glance

one would have taken him for thirty, but on closer scrutiny one discovered lines incompatible with youth. The name was Semitic, but there was little of the Hebrew in his caste of countenance. Certain traces suggested the Spaniard; others, so Professor Bassermann insinuated, the Russian. His quick nervous movements, his voice when raised by excitement, little mannerisms almost too trifling to be noticed, seemed more Oriental than European. In certain moments, in certain moods, he was positively Assyrian. The secrets of Egypt seemed to slumber in his long lashes. His eyes, changing color with his moods, were baffling. Now they flashed like the glint of a sword; now, softening, they seemed to swim with tears like eyes of one who had seen the fall of Jerusalem.

"What is your country?" Professor Bassermann asked.

"You speak English like a native," interjected Aubrey.

"I am something of a linguist," the other smiled.

"You are a Russian, are you not?" Bassermann again insisted.

"Call me—a Cosmopolitan."

Isaac Laquedem toyed with the conversation. He tossed it like a ball into the air and caught it again unexpectedly with the skill of a juggler. He displayed a marvelous knowledge of out-of-the-way subjects. He spoke with such confidence of obscure authors and half-forgotten periods of history that Aubrey, who listened fascinated, suspected him of being an imaginative and delightful liar rather than an erudite.

3. PROFESSOR BASSERMANN SUSPECTS

AFTER THE REPAST, Father Ambrose invited the guests into his study, a room lighted with ancient candles in curious holders of bronze and precious wood. The tables were littered with yellow-tinted tomes in many languages. Parchments from Egypt brushed against the most recent treatises from the medical bookshops of Paris. The monk was acquainted with the revolutionary theories of the explorers of the unconscious—Freud, Adler, and Jung.

Isaac Laquedem had retired to his room, but his valet, a young Japanese, brought, with the compliments of his master, Russian cigarettes wrapped in silk and bearing the imperial initials.

"A brand manufactured especially for the czar!" Professor Bassermann exclaimed.

Aubrey lit one of the flavored cigarettes. Curious Eastern visions rose out of the poppied smoke that curled in fantastic pillars.

The Japanese was patiently awaiting further orders; it was not clear whether the youth understood one word of the conversation. For a moment, an intolerably superior smile lit the wrinkles of his Oriental mouth, but when Aubrey looked again, he saw merely a responsive servant. With a nod, Father Ambrose dismissed him.

The three scholars were still discussing the valet when

Isaac Laquedem reappeared in a velvet smoking jacket. His eyes—a little cynical, a little sad, but shining with an almost uncanny luster—took in the situation.

"Kotikokura is very useful to me," he remarked nonchalantly. "I picked him up in the East some years ago."

"Does he speak English?" Professor Bassermann fired the question off like a shot.

"Perfectly."

Bassermann looked eloquently at Aubrey. Isaac Laquedem caught his glance.

"Like all Orientals, Kotikokura has learned the wisdom of silence. He notices everything. He has a marvelous memory, but he never reveals himself even to me. Even I do not know what slumbers in the subcaverns of his mind."

"It is easy enough," Aubrey remarked, "to rob the brain of its secrets. Psychoanalysis is the key that unlocks the uttermost portals. I believe it is even possible to establish memory reaching beyond the confines of the life of the individual. What are instincts, but inherited race memories?"

"Have you ever experimented in this direction?" Father Ambrose remarked.

"No," Aubrey replied, "psychoanalysis demands intense concentration. A perfect analysis, according to orthodox Freudians, requires three years. Even a preliminary sounding of the subconscious takes several months. Besides, the subject must be thoroughly in sympathy with the experiment."

"Time is heavy on your hands here," Father Ambrose added. "It will be weeks—maybe months—before you receive your visa. I am most anxious to be present at such an investigation. Even a preliminary study would be a fascinating experience. But where could we obtain a subject for the experiment?"

He unconsciously gazed at the stranger. Professor Bassermann caught the direction of his glance. He whistled softly to himself and then, as if seized by a sudden idea, he remarked: "Perhaps Mr. Laquedem would be willing to reveal his secrets to three stern priests of science?" His distrust of the stranger was evident in his words.

Isaac Laquedem smiled. "Professor Bassermann with the penetration of his remarkable mind has read my thoughts, for I was just about to volunteer my services."

4. PROBERS OF THE SOUL

THE NEXT MORNING at ten o'clock, Father Ambrose and Aubrey, assisted by Professor Bassermann, completed the preparations for their experiment. The library, always somber, was artificially darkened.

Chairs were so placed that the subject would gaze directly into the eyes of his questioner. Immediately facing Laquedem's chair, Professor Bassermann placed his traveling Dictograph which, more precise than a stenographer, was to record every word that would escape the lips of the subject as well as every question of the scientific inquisition. On the table, near his chair, the professor placed a chronometer that would register mechanically the time elapsing between question and answer. By this simple expedient, it would become evident if Laquedem answered the questions in a straightforward manner or if he shammed. The least hesitation would be recorded instantly by a little curve.

Professor Bassermann also placed before him a gauge with a rubber tube to measure the pressure of the blood. Any emotion that conceals itself from the scrutiny of the closest observer is recorded in the pressure of the blood as it pounds from the heart to the brain. The terror that neither blanches nor reddens the cheek, the remembered lust, the mental strain recalled, but unuttered, appear in the lines of the psychologist's chart.

All these devices of science Professor Bassermann and Aubrey explained to Father Ambrose who, being familiar with the theory underlying the various laws, found it no difficult matter to appreciate the cunning of each delicate mechanism.

Isaac Laquedem appeared, preceded by Kotikokura, who carried a box of cigars for his master with the same air of importance as if he had been a court chamberlain bearing the crown jewels of a king. Laquedem was dressed in black. He was wearing his velvet smoking jacket which caressed his figure snugly. His hair, not brushed back as on previous occasions, betrayed a propensity toward curliness.

At a word from Laquedem, the valet left. He was gone before one realized that the door had closed behind him. For a moment Aubrey had the weird impression that Kotikokura had crept out of the room on all fours.

Laquedem calmly lit a cigarette. He seated himself on one of the chairs, sinking deeply into the velvet cushions, and puffed little spirals of smoke to the ceiling.

"Are you going to hypnotize me?" Laquedem asked.

"No, I merely want to ease your mind. Imagine that you are going to sleep. Don't resist my questions. Answer spontaneously and say whatever comes into your head."

"But isn't that hypnotism?"

"No. You will presently fall into a state of repose resembling sleep; you will give me, so to speak, the key to your soul. I shall unlock door after door until I open the gate of the unconscious. But first, we must lull to sleep the inhibitions which are posted like sentries at the threshold of the conscious mind. No thought escapes unchallenged by them. Upon every shadow that leaves the caverns of the nether brain, they fasten a mask, to protect it from recognition before it can merge into consciousness."

He spoke slowly, monotonously, all the while gazing steadfastly into the calm eyes of Isaac Laquedem.

Professor Bassermann had hypnotized many people. It was his claim that every person was susceptible to hypnosis. But the quiet smile that quivered about the lips of the stranger rasped his sensitiveness. It had been his original intention to lull Laquedem into a mild state of semiconsciousness, but he now strained every nerve to impose his will upon the subject.

The professor's face twitched with exertion. Beads of cold perspiration appeared on his spacious forehead. Several minutes passed in this mental duel. The tension between the two minds was tangible in the room.

Laquedem never moved. His pupils probed the eyes of Professor Bassermann. The latter, overcome by a sudden faintness, held his hand to his head. He resolutely shut his eyes and turned away. Another minute and the great psychologist would have been hypnotized by his subject!

To hide his confusion, Professor Bassermann lit one of Laquedem's cigars. Laquedem smiled.

"I think he is shamming," Bassermann softly whispered to Aubrey.

"No, I think there is a certain antipathy between him and you that breaks the thought current. Let me try."

He did not attempt to put Laquedem to sleep with his unaided eyes, but used a glittering ring, a strange device showing a serpent, the symbol of infinity and of knowledge.

Perhaps the struggle with Bassermann had exhausted Laquedem's power of resistance; perhaps the caressive stroke of Aubrey's fingers against his temples overcame his resistance. Laquedem's lids trembled, his breath came heavily like that of a sleeper, his pulse beat against the wrist with subdued regularity. The cigarette fell from his hands, burning a hole in the carpet.

Professor Bassermann felt Laquedem's pulse. "He is asleep," he said.

Father Ambrose touched Laquedem's forehead making, by habit, the sign of the cross. The sleeper reacted violently. A groan rose to his lips. He clutched his hands convulsively. But a few strokes from Aubrey recomposed his trembling nerves.

Isaac Laquedem was no longer asleep. Aubrey made no attempt to prolong the hypnotic spell. Hovering in a state between waking and sleeping, peculiar to psychoanalysis, Laquedem's thoughts, like flights of birds, darting hither and thither, could alight where they pleased.

Nevertheless, he replied alertly to every question put to him by Aubrey. He also replied, though less quickly, to questions put to him by the others. A curious relief betrayed itself in his features, as slowly drawn out of the depth of memory, his story unfolded itself before the astounded ears of the three men.

II

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ISAAC LAQUEDEM

1. I WITNESS THE TRIAL OF JESUS— I QUARREL WITH JOHN

THE DAY set for the trial of Jesus was mild and cool. I dressed myself carefully in my new uniform of a Roman captain, an honor unique for a Hebrew boy.

The streets were crowded with pedestrians and riders on donkeys.

The people entertained no hatred for Jesus. They had seen many erratic prophets. Peculiar claims to divinity or royalty rather amused than angered them. But this was a rare privilege—to see a prophet taken seriously by the priests, and actually brought to trial.

The courtroom was already filled. I recognized a few officers who invited me to join them, but I preferred to remain alone in a corner. Two young men near me were talking in Latin, and changed immediately to Hebrew, taking me for a Roman, no doubt.

"Did you ever hear the fellow whom the priests are dragging before the governor?"

"Yes, on two occasions."

"What does he say?"

"He hides the poverty of his thought under a cloak of parables. A paradox conceals his lack of logic. 'Love your enemy!' he says. What lack of pride! How typical of slaves! Strength and hate are brothers. Indeed, it is more important to hate than to love indiscriminately. Jesus of Nazareth speaks as a slave preaching to slaves!"

"Why do they take him seriously? If he is crucified, he may become a source of danger. Some poet may write a song embellishing his philosophy and his ancestry."

"He calls himself the Son of God . . ."

"I should like to go away from Jerusalem to Athens or Rome—"

"So should I."

"Any place indeed, where one does not meet so many sons of God."

Pilate entered, followed by two Roman officers. He seated himself upon the judgment seat and breathed heavily for several moments. He was becoming too stout, and tired rapidly. The Jews glanced furtively at him. They had heard all sorts of fantastic stories about his cruelties and his orgies. The Romans, however, looked at him smilingly. A few of the officers nodded.

Procla, the wife of Pilate, came in unnoticed, and hid behind a pillar near her husband. She was slim and tall. Her eyebrows, several shades darker than her hair, contrasted vividly with her pale face. Her lips were always red, her hands moved restlessly.

"Bring in the prisoner," Pilate commanded.

Jesus was brought in by a soldier. He was dressed in tatters and on his head he wore a withered wreath. The populace hissed. Some called out: "King! King!" An old woman spat. Jesus showed no emotion. His blue eyes were fixed beyond Pilate.

"Silence!" Pilate ordered.

"What is this man's guilt?" he asked of the High Priest, a stout individual, gaudily dressed.

"He blasphemes against our faith."

"Words, words, vague words! Is he guilty of any concrete transgression against the law?"

"He calls himself king, Pilate."

"He speaks in metaphors," Pilate yawned, bored. "I do not find him guilty."

"He is guilty! He is guilty!" shouted the populace.

"You hear it, Pilate," the High Priest added. "He is guilty. It is the truth."

"Truth? What is truth?" Pilate asked, addressing Jesus.

"Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice," answered Jesus gently.

"He blasphemes again. Blasphemer! Traitor!" shouted the people.

"You hear it, Pilate?"

The air was becoming insufferable. Pilate was feeling drowsy. He longed to be back at the palace, drink cool wine, and read the new edition of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria,* which amused him greatly.

Pilate turned his head for a moment and saw Procla. "Ah, my dear, you see it is not possible. I would gladly save him for one of your philosophic receptions, but the rabble, my love—" He made a gesture of despair. Pilate's wife did not answer. She made an indefinite motion.

"Take him!" Pilate commanded, and turning to a soldier, he ordered, "Bring me some perfumed water that I may wash my hands and face."

"Saviour! Save yourself! Try a miracle!"

The people were frantic with joy. They laughed, shouted, parodied the words of Jesus. " 'Everyone who heareth my voice—' "

"Who heareth his voice?"

"Where are your chariots, King?"

A cross was dragged through the crowd, and laid upon the back of Jesus. He accepted the burden with the same meekness and unconcern with which he had accepted the judgment.

I pushed through the crowd, and shouted at him, "If you are man, raise your cross and smite them."

Jesus answered without looking at me, "Love your enemies!"

"Love! Love! It is more important to hate," I answered.

Jesus, paying no attention to his tormentors, flashed a look of anger at me, which struck me like a blow. To regain my composure, I continued, "You are a slave, preaching a slave creed to slaves!"

"Your crown is falling, King!" several shouted. The wreath fell. Someone raised it, and was about to replace it tauntingly upon the head of Jesus, but it crumbled in his hands.

Many laughed, slapping their thighs.

Procla motioned to me. "Cartaphilus, I must see you this evening."

I nodded.

The rabble followed Jesus for a little while, jeering and throwing pebbles and refuse at him, but gradually growing weary, began to disperse. Something prompted me to continue.

Suddenly from a nearby alley, John emerged, frail, slim, almost boyish, his tawny head disheveled.

"They are taking him! They are taking him!" he cried.

I placed my hands upon his shoulders, and looked into his eyes. Their blue was clouded; they seemed almost black. He stared at me uncomprehendingly. "John, wake up. Don't you know who I am?"

"They will crucify him!"

"Others have died before him, even gods. But still the world goes on. What is he to you?"

"They will crucify him!" He buried his face in his hands. His curls overflowed both. Their trembling betrayed his intense agitation.

"What is Jesus to you? Why have you given your heart to him?" I asked bitterly. "You have forgotten Cartaphilus."

He did not answer.

"John, we have been together since childhood. Hardly a day passed without our seeing each other. We discovered sex together. We discovered love together. We discovered Woman together. Arm in arm we walked, discussing philosophy, declaiming poetry, laughing at the foibles and stupidities of mankind. Our lives mingled like two rivers, each giving magnitude to the other. Our thoughts intertwined like the roots of two trees. How can you leave me so utterly?"

He did not answer.

"And for what reason? For whom?"

"Jesus is the Son of God."

"The Son of God? He is a carpenter, and a carpenter's son. You know that, John."

He looked at me. In his eyes was the meekness of Jesus. I was furious. "You are even imitating his slavish look. We prided ourselves in being freemen. We despised the humility of our people. Have you forgotten that also?"

He looked at me again, and without uttering a word, walked back to the city.

2. MY MISTRESS MARY MAGDALENE—THE EYES OF JESUS—JESUS PUTS A SPELL ON ME—I AM THE SOLE WITNESS OF THE CRUCIFIXION

AT THE TURNING of the road which marks the limits of Jerusalem, a heavily veiled woman knelt before Jesus, kissing his feet and hands, and sobbing bitterly. The soldier and the executioner, noticing that she seemed reluctant to release their prisoner, dragged the woman away, and continued their way. The woman remained with her face in the dust. Curious to know who it was, I approached her. "Come, come, you must not despair so. And, after all, is it not of his own free will that he carries the cross?"

She raised her head. Her hair fell over her shoulders like a fountain of gold.

Before she uncovered her face I knew it was Mary.

I lifted her. I tried to embrace her, but she repelled me.

"You, too? John has left me. Now you! Half of my life has vanished with John . . . and now you! How shall a man live, whose heart has been crushed like iron upon an anvil?"

"Believe in Him."

"Believe in him? Who is he?"

"The Son of God. Believe in Him, Cartaphilus, and in heaven we shall be together."

I laughed bitterly. "How he has perverted your minds with his diabolical nonsense! Love me now and never mind what will happen in heaven."

"No, no! You do not understand. I love you, but never again that way—" She looked at me as John and Jesus had looked.

"Mary, have you forgotten how happy we were? Have you forgotten the days? Have you forgotten the nights?"

She did not answer, gazing blankly into the distance.

"My first, my incomparable love! Mary! You were dearer and more precious to me than the very breath of my being. My life was ecstasy. I had found the perfect friendship of John, and—you! I was happy beyond all mortals! And now—both of you are bewitched by this pseudo-prophet!"

"Cartaphilus!" she admonished. "He is the Son of God!"

I disregarded her remark. "If at least you loved a man, I could either smother my jealousy or slay my rival! It is not Jesus you love, but the dream of a madman—a ghost! you are possessed!"

She looked at me meekly. It was a meekness that stung me to the quick, the meekness of John, the meekness of Jesus.

I could not bear her eyes. I rushed away. Her golden head disappeared in the distance. I hurried to catch up with the sorry procession.

Jesus dragged his feet slowly. The cross, toppling to one side, beat lightly against his side. Suddenly he fell. I bent to lift him. He looked at me, but beckoned to one of the soldiers, saying in faulty Latin: "Help me, Roman!"

I was white with anger. Jesus staggered to his feet. Tauntingly I muttered: "Where are your followers? Where is your father in heaven, you fool? All have forsaken you. Go on! Go faster! Go to your self-chosen doom!"

Jesus turned around and looked at me. All meekness had vanished from his face, now ablaze with anger. "I will go, but thou shalt tarry until I return."

His voice struck my ears like a hammer. His eyes were two long spears tipped with fire, hurled against my head. The earth quaked underneath me. My face burned as if enveloped by flames.

"I will go, but thou shalt tarry until I return!"

Did he repeat the words, or was it an echo that mocked me?

"He is raving!" I shouted. "He is raving!"

The soldiers laughed.

We reached the Place of Skulls. The soldier that had accompanied the executioner left, and the executioner set to work immediately. I seated myself on a rock, and watched, unobserved.

The executioner did his work quietly and deftly. Only from time to time his breath lengthened into a low whistle of a Greek love song which had been in vogue at Rome some years previously. Pilate used to whistle it after several glasses of wine. The long nails for the feet were crooked. He straightened them out on a stone, beating lightly with his hammer against their humped backs. A few drops of the trickling blood touched his sandals, and he rubbed his feet in the dust.

Two Roman soldiers approached as he was delivering his last strokes.

"He will never fall off, friend, of that you may rest assured," said one of the soldiers. The three men laughed, then walked a few steps away from the cross and turning their backs to it, seated themselves on the ground. The executioner filled three cups with a very dark wine, which he took out of a small ditch, where he had hidden it to keep it cool.

Jesus moaned, "Water, water," many times, in Hebrew and in Latin.

I wished to go away, but could not. Something riveted me to the spot.

The three men were playing dice while emptying their cups in one or two gulps.

The executioner swore loudly. He was losing steadily. He even accused his friends of using loaded dice.

Jesus moaned. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

The executioner lost his last coin. He was too angry to drink a toast.

"It is all due to that Hebrew. His moaning upset me and made my hand tremble." Running to the cross, he shouted, "What the devil are you groaning about?"

"Water. Water."

"You shall get water—you shall!" And filling to the brim a wine cup, he placed it to the lips of Jesus, saying, "Drink, Hebrew, drink!" Jesus sipped a few drops, his body shrank, and he dropped his head upon his left shoulder.

"What did you give him to drink?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Some strong vinegar, which I was taking home to pickle cucumbers."

"He does look as if he were dead."

"Pierce him with your sword, and we'll see."

One of the soldiers drew his sword and pierced Jesus below the ribs. A stream of blood and water rushed out. Jesus shivered for a few moments, then remained still.

"He is dead now," said the soldier.

"Come along to Jerusalem," said the other. "We haven't won your money to hoard it. Come!"

The executioner was reluctant. The soldier whispered something in his ear. He smiled.

Remembering that I had an appointment with Pilate's wife, I arose, shook myself violently, and walked to the palace.

3. I PHILANDER WITH PILATE'S WIFE—PILATE'S CAST-OFF MISTRESS—LYDIA PUTS ME TO BED—THE MADNESS OF JOHN—MARY AND THE RAGAMUFFINS

Procla welcomed me as cordially as usual, although I noticed an absent-mindedness in her manner, the reason for which I suspected too well.

"You're late, Cartaphilus."

"The noise and the stench of the rabble made me sick. I rested a while."

She stared at me. Did she guess that I was lying? "You were his friend, were you not?"

"I knew him as a boy. He was just like everybody else. I thought he would become a good carpenter."

"Of course. And what made the carpenter turn to religion?"

"Religion is a species of mania—a desire to escape from reality. He was a Jew and a carpenter; he wished to be neither."

Procla sighed and fanned herself lazily. "Come nearer me, Cartaphilus."

I approached her, and taking her small hand, I said, "I love you." I kissed her.

She smiled. "Dear boy, you should know by this time that I am faithful to Pilate."

"You inflame me, Procla; you madden me . . . and then you push me away."

"Let me see your eyes, Cartaphilus." She took my head

between her hands. "You may be right, after all. Perhaps you are not a Hebrew. There is more pride and hatred in your eyes than . . . in His."

I stood up. "Please do not speak of His eyes any more!"

She burst out laughing. "You are jealous, Cartaphilus—jealous of a corpse on a cross!"

I would have dashed out of the room, but Pilate entered, jovial as ever, and a little unsteady on his feet.

"What a magnificent poet Ovid is, my dear!" He addressed his wife. "And how he knows love. You must read the book, and you too, Cartaphilus. But you don't seem to be overcheerful tonight."

"We were speaking about the Jew you condemned to the cross this morning, dear, and of His eyes . . ." Procla interjected.

"You know how I hate to think of state matters at home. So let us not—" The governor waved his hand. "By the way, Cartaphilus, I have a gift for you, a magnificent gift. Will you excuse us for a few moments, my dear?"

I saluted, and followed Pilate, who was laughing uninterruptedly. He led me into his private library in a remote wing of the palace and pointed to a couch in the farthest angle of the room. Upon it reclined a woman.

She was a Greek, slim and athletic. She wore her brown hair tied in a knot. Her small firm breasts, trembling like doves, bespoke passion. Her face was illuminated by a smile, but there was tragedy in her eyes. The smile emphasized the somberness that slept in their depths.

"Lydia, come here." She approached us. I remembered having seen her once in the country home of the governor. "Cartaphilus—the Much-Beloved—your new lover."

"I regret giving her to you," he added, "but one must not be selfish . . . and I am near fifty. Lydia has afforded me more pleasure than any other woman, excepting Procla. Procla is incomparable."

He slapped my back.

I wondered if the compliment to his wife were intended to tantalize me. However, Lydia was young and pretty, and the pride of being the governor's successor thrilled me. I bowed and thanked him profusely.

"But does Lydia accept me?" I asked suddenly.

"She has chosen you herself. And now take her away. I must keep my wife company. She is lonesome tonight."

I took Lydia to my villa. We spent a few hours carous-

ing and making love. My tension relaxed; I fell asleep on her bosom. I dreamt that Jesus was coming toward me. On either side of Him, and keeping Him by the hand, were John and Mary. They were talking and laughing, and seemed very happy. They looked at me, without recognizing me, and passed on. I called after them. "John! Mary!" They walked on. I knew that if I called Jesus, they would stop. But I refused to do so, preferring to see them turn a corner, and disappear.

I awoke. A feeling of great loneliness overwhelmed me. Lydia was snoring—daintily, but unmistakably. I dressed myself and walked out. It was still dark. The streets were empty, except for an occasional soldier or laborer. I remembered the dream too vividly, and as if to run away from it, I took very long strides. Was it a kind of somnambulism that led me to the cross? I walked so fast, my head bent, that I nearly struck the feet of Jesus before I became aware of my whereabouts. I stopped short, as if suddenly imprisoned.

I was seized with nausea. I shivered like a man in fever. Was it simply a physical disgust, was it sorrow, was it something for which the human tongue had fashioned no word? Suddenly, as if prompted by an extraneous power, I raised my arms and shouted to the dead man, "I hate you!"

"Thou must tarry until I return," answered the voice, and the words reverberated for a long while. I was stunned. Who was it that spoke? It was no illusion, I was certain of that! I heard the words as distinctly as if someone had spoken them into my very ear.

"Thou must tarry until I return."

I fled. I was afraid I was going mad. When I reached home, Lydia opened her eyes. "Come back to bed, Cartaphilus," she whispered.

"I am ill, Lydia. My head aches."

She rose, undressed me, and helped me to bed.

On the morning of the third day, I awoke.

I took a walk in the city. Jerusalem was normal. I looked into the faces of the people. They seemed supremely unconscious that an event of importance had taken place two days previously.

I reached the gate of the Temple. John was leaning against it. "Cartaphilus—the Much-Beloved—He has risen!"

"What do you mean?"

"Jesus has risen from the dead. They have buried him, but He has risen."

"No man has ever risen from the dead."

"Cartaphilus—Isaac Laquedem—Isaac aforetime—believe me—He has risen!"

"You are raving."

He looked at me very sadly. "I am waiting for the Master. It is to Him I shall go. And as for you, Isaac—you must tarry until He comes again." He sighed. His eyes filled with tears, and he turned his head.

"You are stark mad!" I shouted, and walked off. It was the intolerable phrase that I wished above all to crush within my memory. How did he know about it? Did the whole city ring with its echo? I decided to go to the garrison and listen to the ribald jests of my companions. Anything to forget.

On the way, I saw a number of fishermen whom I recognized as the intimate followers of Jesus. Among them was Mary, badly dressed, and her hair in disorder.

"Mary," I said, "how can you associate with those ragamuffins?"

"He has risen, Cartaphilus! He has risen from His tomb and will be with us again this evening."

"The dead are dead forever."

"Don't you understand, my dear, that you must see Him again tonight, and believe in Him, or else you must tarry—"

She looked at me, but her eyes were the eyes of Jesus.

"Go away!" I shouted furiously, to hide a strange uneasiness. "Go back to your ragamuffins!"

4. PRINCESS SALOME YAWNS—THE PARABLE OF THE QUEEN BEE—I ANOINT MYSELF WITH PERFUME—THE PRINCESS COMMANDS—THE MASKED PARAMOUR

THE GOVERNOR summoned me to appear at once. Princess Salome, stepdaughter of the late King Herod, famous for her beauty and for strange amorous adventures, had arrived in Jerusalem.

"You shall be her guard of honor, Cartaphilus," he said. "You speak not only Latin and Hebrew, but the one language that like a spear pierces the armor of the mightiest princess."

The left wing of the palace was reserved for the Princess Salome and her suite. I appointed a company of soldiers in charge of a young lieutenant to guard the gate, while, according to the arrangements made by the governor, I awaited Salome and her orders in the immense hall which faced the artificial lake in whose waters gold fish glistened like jewels. Finally she arrived.

I saluted. "I am Captain Cartaphilus. The governor has done me the great honor of appointing me guard of honor to Her Highness, Princess Salome."

She nodded. Her mouth opened slightly, allowing an instant's glow of her teeth—diamonds breaking through a rose. The glitter of her eyes and her burnished hair merged with the green and scarlet jewels studding the coronet. She walked to the throne in the center of the hall. Her steps were tiny and measured, in the manner of Egyptian ladies, and the gems of her slippers made aureoles about her feet. Her bare arms, covered with bracelets the shape of crocodiles, balanced slowly and

rhythmically. Her breasts, full-blown, were encased in two golden bowls.

I stood at attention.

Delicately, but unmistakably, Princess Salome yawned.

I was piqued. Instinctively rather than consciously, I decided to avenge myself. I saluted, and left.

Pilate had told me that Salome was well read and conversed brilliantly, but while we rode in the chariot, I tried in vain to engage her to speak.

She evidently considered me a bore, and yet I had the reputation of a wit and a man more than usually attractive to women. What had made her snub me?

I yearned to hate her, to mock her, but the slightest touch of her robe thrilled me with unendurable desire.

I accompanied the princess to the various places of interest in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. She listened condescendingly to my remarks on the history, the poetry, the legends.

We walked along the shore of the lake.

Salome bent over the orchids and lilies, caressing their pistils and hard petals. A bee buried itself into a flower, and emerged soon, his wings gilded with pollen.

The princess sighed. "Ah, to be indeed like the bee, to soar high, high—to be pursued by a thousand lovers, to be finally conquered by one whose wings, powerful and indefatigable, touch tremblingly those of the queen!"

"Oh, the incomparable joy of pursuing the queen!" I exclaimed.

"Alas for the conqueror, Captain, for he may not live beyond love's moment! The queen demands his sacrifice!"

"What joy would life hold for him after love's moment?"

The princess looked at me, her eyes half closed. . . .

That night I anointed myself with rare Egyptian perfumes. My curls glistened from the delicate oils. I covered my arms and fingers with jewels and donned a new uniform, the gift of Pilate.

I dismissed the lieutenant, remaining on guard myself. I walked up and down the great hall, thinking of a subtle and beautiful manner of attack. From time to time, I glanced at myself in the large Corinthian mirror.

The door opened, and there entered a very tall and powerful man, whose face was veiled, accompanied on either side by a lady-in-waiting of the princess. I stopped

them. One of the women placed her forefinger to her lips, whispering: "The princess commands."

Who was this man? What was the meaning of this intrusion? My plans were crushed under his feet, as a delicate vase under the paws of an elephant.

Meanwhile, the women walked in and out of the room, carrying delicacies, wines, spices, perfumes. Someone played upon the harp a sensuous, languorous melody, and another danced.

Who was this man? What mighty prince? What youth of unconquerable beauty? I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a face which was ugly and commonplace. I thought, Cartaphilus, you were vain indeed to believe yourself the glorious king who conquers the queen! You are but an insignificant captain, a shoemaker's son, a Jew!

The entire night the revelry continued, alternating between laughter and music and dancing, and vague, amorous whispers and groans.

Again and again I was on the point of dashing into the room, of shouting epithets of abomination and of thrusting my sword into the body of Salome.

The rays of the sun, like long fingers, caressed the powerful legs of the royal throne. I looked into the mirror. A haggard, drawn face stared back at me. Even my wildest debauches had never left me so bedraggled.

The door of the royal bedchamber opened cautiously. Was it Salome? Had she come to atone for her intolerable cruelty? Had everything been merely a nightmare and an illusion? Was she ready for the nuptial flight, for the honeymoon in the clouds?

The tall man who had entered the previous evening appeared upon the threshold. Was this an illusion indeed? Was he the magnificent prince, the chosen one of Salome —a Nubian, black as charcoal, heavy-featured, and as colossally muscled as a giant bull!

I drew my sword. "Halt!" I commanded. A woman in back of him placed her forefinger to her lips: "The princess commands." I motioned him to pursue his way.

"What subtle means have conquered an exquisite love, O Princess?" I asked aloud.

It seemed to me I heard some one laugh.

"Daughter of Evil!" I shouted, and rushed out.

5. MY FIRST MARRIAGE—PROCLA ASKS A QUESTION—THE DESPERATION OF LYDIA—THE CURIOUS HETAERA

Lydia was a mother to me—a slave to my whims. I married her. What I really wished was to force myself by an outward symbol to lead a normal existence. I wished to be able to say to myself: "Cartaphilus, forget—forget whatever preceded Lydia, forget John, forget Mary, forget the eyes of Jesus. And forget Salome."

I felt the need of ceaseless occupation. I engaged in many business ventures. I became wealthy. I lived in luxury, and for some years, at any rate, I was considered one of the principal citizens of Jerusalem.

John and Mary had vanished. My inquiries and searches were all futile. The followers of Jesus were not numerous enough to attract attention, and they remained unmolested.

Pilate returned to Rome. He had grown old, and bored even with Ovid and with his wife. Whether he really committed suicide afterward, as the rumor had it, or not, I cannot tell. At any rate, I never saw him again. Procla kissed me good-by.

"What makes you so youthful, Cartaphilus? Is it a racial characteristic? Romans who lead so gay a life would be bald and stout like poor Pilate, and complain, like him, of rheumatism. But you—you have not changed one particle all these years. What is your secret?"

"You exaggerate my youth, I am sure; and moreover, you exaggerate your age."

She sighed. "Farewell, Cartaphilus. It is no longer in my power to persuade men. Farewell."

This was the first time that any one mentioned to me the suspicion that I possessed the secret of youth. Like a brazen drum, the words *thou shalt tarry until I return* re-echoed in my ears. Had Jesus, by some curious magic, some incomprehensible trick, stopped the flow of sand in the hourglass for me?

For the first time I seriously reconsidered the strange spell he had pronounced upon me.

Was it true? Was I really to linger on and on, see friends and things I cherished die and crumble away? Was I to stare into infinity, seeking for Him at whom I had shouted *I hate you*?

"Lydia, my dear, it seems to me that my hair is getting gray at the temples. Look!" I wished to see if she, too, was aware of my predicament.

"Let me see. Let me see," she said, excitedly. In her eyes, less lustrous than of yore, I saw a great delight. She ruffled my hair, and looked very closely. "No, not even one gray thread." She burst into sobs.

"What's the trouble, my dear?"

"Nothing."

I did not want to press the matter, fearing that I would have, perhaps, to explain too much.

The next day, she took an overdose of a drug prescribed for her for some intestinal derangement. For three days she was in agony. She looked at me wistfully.

"It was the only way out," she said. "I have noticed for a long while how my hands grated on your skin, and my lips brought nothing but a chill. You are young. I am old. This was what you meant the other day when you asked me to look at your hair. I understood."

Her convulsions became more and more violent, but more painful even than her approaching death was her misunderstanding of my motive. I had really killed her —unwillingly.

On my return from her funeral, Aurelia, the most beautiful courtesan in Jerusalem, accosted me. King Herod himself had paid one thousand talents for her embrace.

"Cartaphilus, spend the night with me!"

My first impulse was to upbraid the insolent woman, but I felt so lonesome, a sorrow so deep gnawed me, that I could not wrench my arm from her grasp.

Fatigued by her caresses, I fell asleep profoundly. When I awoke, she asked me, smiling: "Cartaphilus, where is the place?"

"What place?"

"I have searched your body everywhere with my lips, but I have not discovered it."

"What do you mean?"

"The prick of the needle where you insert the magic potion that gives you undying youth. I have loved much. I have shared the couch of many. I have known the loves of old men from whose touch the skin shrinks as from a reptile. I know that you must be sixty, but you have the skin of a boy, the muscles of a gladiator, the insatiable endurance of youth. I have given you joy when you were most distressed. I can give you tenfold, a hundredfold greater joy, Cartaphilus. I know the love secrets and the love potions of fifty nations. I know," she whispered, "the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged. All my knowledge will be yours, if only you will let me share your secret."

I pushed her away from me.

"You are raving, woman! The heavy wine has gone to your head. Let me sleep."

Her face grew livid with rage. "You fool! You really believe that I care for you? I loathe you! Even the old men who come to me with their silver and gold, with lecherous lips and limbs marred by disease, are not as loathsome as you. They are at least human!"

She stamped angrily out of the room.

At least human! reverberated in my ear, as the other phrase which I always tried not to repeat, even mentally. Not human! Not human! I was set apart from all other men. I was alone. Everybody would sooner or later point at me: Stranger! Outcast! Alien!

6. I LIQUIDATE MY ESTATE—I ARRIVE IN ROME—I TEMPT THE GODS—NERO FIDDLES—I BLAME THE NAZARENES

Envy disguised itself as hostility. My friends insinuated, laughed, mocked. The gay women who used to accost me shrank away at my approach. No doubt Aurelia had spoiled my reputation in the demimonde of Jerusalem.

The beard I raised only emphasized my youthful appearance. I shaved it off.

I lived alone. I realized that before long popular envy against me would burst out like a volcano. What would happen to me, whether I could really be killed or hurt, I did not know. But I was certain that it would be unpleasant. I liquidated my estates, a matter which I already found very difficult to accomplish, resigned my position in the Roman army, and left the city.

I arrived in Rome just as the sun was setting. Its immense reflection in the Tiber resembled a great conflagration.

I was walking slowly along the shore, analyzing half a dozen emotions that besieged me, when I heard a piercing cry. "Help! Help! Help!"

The mock fire upon the river rose into tongues of flame as a boy beat the water desperately. Several people rushed to the spot. A woman pulled one, then another, by the toga. "Save him! Save him! My son! Save him!"

I meant to continue my walk. What strange power, then, hurled me suddenly, dressed as I was, and against my will, into the river? By what strange instinct did I find myself swimming, when I had never swum before?

I caught the boy just as he was sinking, and held him in one arm; with the other I beat the water. The Tiber pulled at my body like a great iron weight. I beat it as one beats a living enemy.

A fisherman's boat arrived. I felt a power pull me upward. I heard a shout, and then a long silence.

I opened my eyes. A man was bending over me. I sneezed in his face. He remained grave and unperturbed. Wiping his face, he said: "Only a cold. A few days of rest, and this drug both for him and the boy."

I noticed then that he was talking to a man and a woman, standing in back of him. In the opposite corner, a child coughed. I realized that I was in the home of the boy I had saved from drowning. If immune from death, I was nevertheless susceptible to colds.

For weeks I was the guest of Lavinius, an enormously wealthy patrician. He introduced me to the imperator. I translated Nero's poems into Hebrew and Chaldean and gained his favor by flattery. I was prejudiced against the imperator because his face was red and covered with pimples, but I was fascinated by the Empress Poppaea. Was it her finely etched nose; was it her lips, indented at each corner, making two exquisite dimples; was it her voluptuous posture, revealing the dazzling fragment of a breast, that made me whisper "Mary"? and Sporus, the emperor's minion—how his large blue eyes gazed directly into the distance: "John!" Was it an illusion? Was it my loneliness that invested with similitude unrelated things?

The imperator was draping the folds of his robe when I entered. He received me cordially. "Look, Cartaphilus, is this perfect?" he asked.

"It is the fold of the statue of a god carved by a master."

The guests were coming, by twos or threes. Nero continued to fix the folds, now and then raising his eyes to notice the effect it produced on the visitors.

His arm tired, he seated himself.

We spoke of various matters. The conversation drifted finally to architecture, which interested him greatly.

"Alas," the emperor remarked moodily, "the Romans

prefer to keep their old wooden shanties instead of building magnificent structures of stone and marble. Rome—Rome—the city of lumber! I love stone, Cartaphilus. Eternity lingers in stone. If I had it my way, I would burn Rome and rebuild it—make it a thing of perfect beauty."

He drank deeply out of his cup, as if to drown his regret, and smacked his heavy lips.

Sporus walked out, slim, graceful, catlike. He was not drunk, but the intoxication of the imperator had communicated itself to him. At the door, he motioned to three soldiers to follow him. The imperator did not notice his departure. Poppaea feigned sleepiness to disguise her boredom. The guests were becoming noisy. Their conversation rose and fell like the din of giant insects. Some couples upon the floor interlaced in amorous postures. A few sang. I was weary, and should have gladly taken leave, but the emperor continued to speak of architecture, of beauty, and of beastly landlords, interested solely in their investments. . . .

"What is this—the dawn?" one of the guests asked. A few laughed.

I looked at the open door. "Your Majesty," I said calmly, "fate has granted your wish. Rome is burning!"

Nero glared at me. I pointed to the columns of smoke embracing the city like serpents. Flames were rising from the seven hills.

"I am lost, Cartaphilus!"

"Fire! Fire!" several guests shouted, rushing out. Poppaea opened her eyes. Nero ran out. I followed him, slowly, unperturbed. I knew that whatever happened to the others, I was immune. For the first time since Jesus had hurled his imprecation against me, I felt that my predicament was not without its benefits. I could be dignified in a crisis that frightened an emperor.

The wind, which had set in toward the evening, fanned the fire. The tongues of flame united into gigantic scarlet masses. People rushed to and fro, shouting and wailing.

Nero turned to me. "Is it right for an emperor to run, Cartaphilus?"

"He can conquer himself, even if he cannot conquer the elements," I answered.

With trembling hands Nero fixed the folds of his garment—and, mastering his impulse to flee, ordered one of the slaves to bring him his harp.

"Is not fire beautiful?" he exclaimed, but his voice quivered. "Shall we not celebrate in its honor?" His teeth chattered. Sporus reappeared, pale, disheveled, his hand bandaged.

"Recite the burning of Troy, Sporus, while I play."

People, running in terror, stopped a moment to listen to the music.

"The monster!" a woman shouted. "He plays the harp! He is roasting our children alive while he plays!"

Nero, now very serious, listened to the distant grumble from the populace.

"This may mean revolution, Cartaphilus," he whispered.

An idea struck me. "No, Your Majesty, not if you take my advice."

"Speak!"

"Your Majesty, when dealing with angry crowds all logic is futile. Their attention should be distracted. The Nazarenes have secret meetings, Your Majesty."

"That is against the law!"

"To them Rome is secondary to the world, and the emperor inferior to their God. They deny the emperor's divinity. Men who deny the divinity of the emperor are capable of any iniquity . . ."

Nero looked at me long.

"The Nazarenes have set fire to Rome! Their leaders shall be thrown to the lions! Cartaphilus, you are my friend. I shall make you the governor of a province."

"What province is comparable to the friendship of Nero?" I asked.

7. THE GREAT GOD ENNUI—I ENTER DELHI ON AN ELEPHANT—I BECOME A MAGICIAN

NERO would never forgive me: I had seen him weak. If Nero discovered the singularity of my fate I would not fare well. He would put me to the test. Perhaps it would amuse him to see me swing from a rope for years, without dying; or be flogged for months, and still breathe; or be cut to bits, retaining consciousness. Nero was subtle and insatiable in his curiosity! Or perhaps, angry that I could outlive and outlove him, it would enter his diabolical mind to mutilate me to deprive me of pleasure. I could not face eternity as a eunuch. . . .

The seven hills began to stifle me. I decided to disappear.

I stood at the crossroads; I turned to the east, I turned to the west, to the north, to the south. Whither? Every path was open to me, but I was like a man whose feet are nailed to the ground. At each extremity I saw an enormous figure, squatting, his face between his palms—ennui, ubiquitous and everlasting.

It is not enough to live. One must find a purpose, a reason for existence.

What god was entrusted with my well-being? Reason, not faith, was my guidance. That was the cause of my quarrel with Jesus and his disciples. I would not—perhaps could not—believe. I must investigate, weigh, reject . . . waiting for time and space to expose, hidden,

like a black pearl, falsehood; or the kernel of truth.

Even the miracle of my own existence did not make me believe in the supernatural. Somewhere there was a mystery; but I refused to worship it. I refused to call it God, or the Son of God, merely because it baffled my reason.

I raised a bit of dust, and threw it into the air. The wind blew it to the east. "It is the hand of God!" I exclaimed, and I laughed.

I entered Delhi, riding on an elephant. The driver walked ahead of the animal, shouting, "Make way for my master! Make way for my master!" The elephant flapped his great ears and raised his trunk toward me. I fed him on small hazel nuts.

At the crossroads, a crowd of people encircled a very dark-skinned man with a long white beard, who waved a black cloth and uttered incomprehensible sounds mingled with prayers from the Upanishads. At his feet, a shrub was rising. He sprinkled water upon it, while continuing his incantation and the waving of the cloth. The trunk spread into branches upon which blossomed large leaves. When the tree reached his knees, the man stopped, breathed deeply several times, and mopped his face.

"Make way for my master!"

"Wait! Wait! Don't disperse the people. I want to see more of this."

The driver helped me jump off the elephant, which turned around and struck my arm gently with his trunk. I filled it with the nuts. "Take him to the empty space yonder, and wait until I come. But be careful," I whispered into his ear. "My valuables are in that sack."

Animal and man went off. I watched them for a few moments, delighted, and mingled with the crowd. The fakir drove several swords into the ground, and asked a boy to stretch out upon the hilts. He covered the body with a black cloth, and motioned to the people to make room. For several minutes, he uttered queer sounds, discoursed on life and death, prayed, all the time waving his arms to east, west, north and south.

The body began to rise slowly, constantly, until it overtopped us all. It remained in the air a few moments, then descended, as leisurely as it had risen. The man removed the cloth, rubbed the boy's forehead and nostrils, made

strange gestures over him. The boy opened his eyes, looked about, bewildered, and jumped off the swords. The spectators laughed. The fakir bowed profoundly and passed around a wooden bowl. The people dispersed.

"I amuse them, I make them laugh, and they do not give me enough to eat." He showed me the bowl which was almost empty.

"I know a place, my friend, where you would be considered a god, if you performed miracles of this sort."

"Where is it? I am not as old as I seem and can travel for days without tiring."

"Crucifixion, however, is apt to precede apotheosis."

He looked at me and smiled. "The penalty is disproportionate to the honor, I fear, sir."

"You are wise."

He was about to go.

"Wait. Since you do not wish to become a god . . . do you wish, at least, to make money? I come from very far-off countries. I am a man of leisure, have nothing to do. If you should care to teach me some of your tricks—"

"Not tricks, sir, I beg you . . . art."

"Art . . . it would be a most entertaining way of spending my time and a means of amusement for my friends."

"It is not easy to teach, sir."

"Does it not depend upon the reward you obtain?"

"My master is wise."

For several months the old fakir and I retired to a solitary villa, where he taught me many remarkable tricks. In a long life, such as mine, it was well to know things that dazzle the onlookers. I rewarded him handsomely.

"It's strange," he said, "you pay to learn what I should gladly forget."

"That is often the case, my friend."

"Will you allow me to praise you, sir? You have a marvelous faculty for the art. You should continue with it."

"Are there better teachers than yourself?"

"Not better, but more accomplished."

He mentioned several Hindu names. Then scratching his head, "But I'm thinking of another man . . . the greatest of them all . . . a Greek . . . but he is not a fakir like me. He is a saint. His great wisdom and the purity of his life enabled him to perform miracles—not trifles such as these. His name is Apollonius the Tyanean."

8. APOLLONIUS OF TYANA RAISES THE DEAD—DAMIS, APOLLONIUS AND JESUS —THE DOUBLE BLOSSOM OF PASSION— "CARTAPHILUS, DO YOU WANT TO DIE?" —"SEEK—AND PERHAPS—YOU SHALL FIND."

Apollonius was not in. The door to his house being open, I entered nevertheless. A very simple home, a few pieces of furniture, Greek statuary, Hindu vases, and large piles of manuscripts. I seated myself on the floor, my legs under me, and waited. I need never be in haste.

It was early afternoon, and the sun basked upon the threshold—a luminous, tamed serpent. I closed my eyes. Peace caressed me like a kind, smooth hand, and I was on the point of falling asleep when Apollonius entered.

He was tall and thin; his eyes were large and black. His full, snow-white beard hung upon his chest. He wore a white silk robe and a silver belt of exquisite design. Upon his left wrist he had a wide bracelet studded with a large emerald. He bowed and bade me welcome.

"Master! Master!" some voices shouted at the door.

Apollonius turned, unperturbed. "What is it, my friends?"

"Master!" An elderly woman in mourning knelt before him. A young man remained standing on the threshold, his head bent. "Master! Bring my daughter back to life. Only a little while ago she was talking to us, laughing, jesting, when suddenly she placed her hand upon her heart—and fell. She is dead, master! She is dead!"

"Is she not happier now?"

"No, master. She was to be married in a week. There is the young groom."

Apollonius meditated, his eyes half closed, his left hand protruding from his belt.

"Bring her in!"

The corpse was brought in.

Apollonius rubbed the girl's forehead gently and pressed her limp hands.

The girl's eyelids trembled; her chest heaved slightly.

"Master! Master!" the mother exclaimed.

Apollonius raised his forefinger, demanding silence. He continued rubbing the girl's forehead and hands, whispering, "Awake!"

The girl opened her eyes, and sighed deeply.

The people who had meanwhile gathered at the door fell upon their faces.

Apollonius stretched out his right hand. His voice, as he spoke, was like the cool waters of a brook, tumbling softly over stones whose edges have been smoothed and rounded.

"Death and life," he remarked, addressing his pupils, "are two facets of the same jewel—sleeping—waking. What reason is there, then, to seek either death or life? . . . Seek rather freedom from both!"

The people dispersed. No one remained, save a dog, who wagged his tail lustily for a few moments, and ran away.

Apollonius was walking silently, his hands clasped behind him.

"Master," I said, "how can such a miracle be accomplished? How can you resurrect the dead?"

"To recall a person from death into life is no more miraculous than to arouse him from sleep. Dying and living are equally mysterious and equally simple," Apollonius replied.

His eyes, like the eyes of Jesus, seemed to penetrate the core of my being. He added, "Life and death depend upon a slight readjustment of balance. The skillful merchant may lift or lower either side by adding or subtracting a tiny weight."

Apollonius had replied to my unspoken question.

"Master," I asked, "can a man find his soul in the space of a single life?"

"It is not a question of finding, my friend, but of seeking."

"Why seek, then, that which cannot be found?"

"That which can be found . . . is it worth the seeking?"

Beyond my name, the master asked me nothing. Our minds met where the accidents of flesh were meaningless.

Damis was the favorite disciple. Apollonius considered him as a son. But he was as dear to me as he was to the master. Hand in hand we walked for hours, discoursing on the remarks of Apollonius, trying to grasp his subtleties. Frequently, I would call him "John." He would smile.

"Why do you call me John, Cartaphilus?"

"I can think of no name half as beautiful for you as John." I preferred not to tell him my story—for the time being, at least. Damis had learned from his master the art of discretion.

"Perhaps something of our ancient prejudices still linger in our souls," Apollonius once said. "Perhaps we might be inconsiderate enough to judge a man by his race or ancestry. It is better to know nothing of him, except as he appears to us in manner and speech."

I looked at Apollonius. He squatted on his doorstep, as radiant as the moon and as unperturbed.

"Master, have you ever heard of Jesus?"

"Yes, in our youth—we were of exactly the same age—we were both the disciples of the same master in Thibet."

"In Thibet?" I asked surprised.

"Yes."

This, then, accounted for the long absence of Jesus from Jerusalem. He never spoke about it even to his intimate friends. A god, I thought, must be mysterious. Addressing Apollonius, I said, "Master, do you know that Jesus has become a god?"

Apollonius smiled. "He was always ambitious."

We continued watching the moon in silence.

"Master, I have traveled in many lands and have seen many things. I have loved and lived much. I see before me a dreary desert of years, a desert without end. Can life offer me nothing except repetition?"

"Time, Cartaphilus, is elastic. It may be stretched or it may be shortened."

"Alas, Master, time must stand still for me—perhaps forever."

He looked at me.

"No, no! I am not speaking in metaphors. I must actually tarry on earth for thousands of years, maybe until the end of time."

He was interested, but not startled.

"Is it not a strange thing, Master?"

"All things are strange, Cartaphilus. But tell me what powerful factor disarrayed so violently the processes of your being?"

Apollonius listened to my extraordinary recital. The moon thinned and became amorphous, like the torn fragment of a cloud. The sun rose silently, as if on tiptoes, afraid perhaps of the great dark that had so recently devoured it. I spoke on, omitting nothing. A young water carrier passed by, and offered us sweets and cool water.

"Master, am I not accursed?"

"Only if your passion for death is greater than your passion for life."

"I am no longer certain, Master."

"Then you must carry your fetters, Cartaphilus, or, if you please, your garland. Make it a garland of roses," Apollonius continued. "Be not afraid of yourself, Cartaphilus. Be strong!"

"Can we be strong? Are we not tossed about by the whim of an irrational fate?"

"The will is both free and not free. If you fling a dead leaf into the air, it is carried hither and thither without volition. If you toss a bird upward, the wind may hamper its flight and dash its brains against a rock, but while life persists it will struggle: its will modifies the wind's will. The average man is a leaf tossed hither and thither. He who has lifted the veil from the face of life resembles the bird. He cannot dominate but, within limits, may direct his fate."

"Master," I said, "the bird has no conception of boredom; he rapturously sings the same note forever. He has no purpose beyond existence. But a man . . . must not a man's life have a purpose, Master, if he is to escape from the clutches of the great god Ennui?"

Apollonius meditated. "Have you not spoken of John and Mary, Cartaphilus?"

"Yes."

"You loved both."

"Both."

He leisurely turned his bracelet.

"And yet if a purpose should be robust enough and capable of a long endurance, would it not suffice?"

"It would, Master."

He combed his beard, twisting the end into a sharp point.

"The ideal you seek is neither Mary nor John, but a synthesis of both, a double blossom of passion, combining male and female without being a monster. If you could find John and Mary in one, Cartaphilus, so that touching Mary, you might feel the thrill of John . . . and speaking to John, you might hear the voice of Mary . . . would it not rejoice you, Cartaphilus?"

My head turned, my ears rang. I shivered. "Yes, Master. Yes. That is what I desire. That is what, in his heart, every man yearns for. Master, you are wise beyond wisdom."

Apollonius smiled.

"But, Master, is it possible? Is it possible to find them both in one?"

"All things are possible, Cartaphilus. The world spirit, in his ceaseless experiments, may evolve your dream. Seek—and perhaps—you shall find."

He rose and walked into the room.

Damis was seated in the semidarkness behind us, and had listened to my story.

"Damis," I said, "you have heard my recital, but you have said nothing."

"Cartaphilus, why was John's love not great enough to embrace both Jesus and you?"

"The Jewish God is a jealous God," I replied. "Jesus inherited the jealous strain from his Father. He enjoined children to forsake their fathers, and lovers their sweethearts, before accepting them as his followers. He recognized no human tie. 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' was his reply to his own mother when she upbraided him for his selfishness."

"Our master makes no conditions. He demands nothing. I love both him and you."

Tenderly I took his hand in mine. Then, weary beyond endurance, I placed my head upon his chest. "Damis, let me sleep."

"Sleep, Cartaphilus."

When I awoke, Apollonius was standing over us, his head bent upon his chest. In his right hand he held a tall staff, the large branch of a cherry tree, planed and surmounted by a gold knob, the shape of several snakes huddled together.

"My children, the time has come when I must depart."

Damis threw himself into his arms. "Master!"

I kissed his hands.

"Apollonius, although we are of the same age, I think of you as my father . . . a father whom I love. I understand better than Damis what you mean. You must go. Damis, make not our master's departure difficult."

"Shall we meet again, Master?" Damis asked.

"The moon begins as a crescent and grows until it becomes a perfect disk. The clouds tear it, then, and smother it, until it vanishes. But the moon is born again . . . and grows again . . . eternally. Is it the same moon always—or is it a new one?"

When we looked up, the white head of Apollonius was disappearing in the distance.

9. DAMIS FALLS ASLEEP—ETERNAL COMRADES—THE MARRIAGE OF THE BLOOD —"YOUR BLOOD IS POISON!"

TOWARD MORNING, Damis fell asleep in my arms. He clutched at me, muttering: "Don't go! Don't go!" I do not know whether his invocation was addressed to Apollonius or to me. He woke up with a jerk, and looked about, bewildered. "The master is gone, Cartaphilus," he said hopelessly.

"Do not carry the past like a chain about your neck, Damis."

"You speak like the master."

"His voice would have been gentler," I said, "and his words more beautiful."

Silence descended upon us with brooding wings.

Damis placed his head upon my shoulder. Again silence nestled about us. "Cartaphilus, is it really possible for you to transfer to another something of the mysterious gift that sets you aside from all human beings?"

"I do not know, Damis. If it were, would you wish to face eternity with me?"

"The thought frightens me, Cartaphilus, but it also lures me. The gift of eternal life may be a blessing to you and to me a curse, and yet who can refuse a drink from the cup of the gods? But am I strong enough to bear the deep darkness and the fierce light of the path where the immortals wander?"

I caressed his head, as soft and tawny as John's. "It is difficult to be strong. The heart, like the athlete's muscle, does not harden except by blows." He smiled at me through the tears that rolled down his cheek.

"Come with me, Damis. Let our destinies mingle and merge together!"

"So be it, Cartaphilus."

A small house on the outskirts of the town was the home of the most celebrated doctor in Delhi. The door was low, and we bent our heads in order to enter.

The doctor was a tiny man, whose long white beard constituted almost half of him. The physician, satisfied that his services would be handsomely rewarded, begged us to sit down, treated us to sweets and water, and recounted his marvelous deeds. He had given life to the dead, limbs to the crippled, sight to the blind, virility to those shipwrecked on the tides of love.

"Doctor, is there a means by which I could communicate my vitality to another?"

The doctor bowed until the tip of his beard touched the ground. We were silent for a while. Then he spoke. "Where is the spirit of life housed? In the blood. Remove a few jars of the red elixir from the body—does not man die? Is it not because the blood is hot that we are young; and when the blood freezes, like water in winter, are we not old? And how do we live once more in our children, if not through the blood? The blood is the man. Blood is the symbol and the truth of Life!"

I nodded.

"Damis," I said, "I believe his idea is the true one, for I, too, have long ago come to a similar conclusion. My blood must mingle with yours, that you may partake of my life."

"Yes, Cartaphilus."

"Damis, are you still willing to risk—immortality? The marriage of our spirits, alas, may be shorter-lived than the marriage of our blood."

"Cartaphilus, Apollonius was as a father to me; you are my brother. I cannot face the future alone. I need you as the vine needs the oak. Let me lean against you forever!" His pale features were flushed, his eyes were restless, like torches reflected in water that is stirred. "Unless," he added, "you think I will be a burden—"

"Your delicate weight shall be as natural to me and as pleasurable as upon my shoulders is the weight of my head."

I turned to the doctor.

"We are ready."

He asked us to strip, and offered us a potion. "This will deaden the pain, although I expect it to be very slight."

We stretched out upon the couch. He looked at us, took our pulse, examined our eyes, tested each limb. Over Damis he stopped much longer, troubled by the boy's epicene beauty. His aged hands trembled. His senses are not dead, I thought. "My friend is very handsome," I whispered. He looked at me guiltily. "Yes, very handsome."

Damis was asleep. The potion and the loss of blood had weakened him. I was quite conscious, and felt no pain, save a tiny itching sensation. The little doctor had bandaged our arms to stop the flow of the blood. Seeing that I watched him, he made many curious motions and mumbled extravagant sounds. I smiled. I had lived long enough to know that every trade had its tricks.

"Is my friend still asleep, Doctor?" I asked.

"I shall wake him now."

He touched him gently over the face. Damis did not stir. He shook him, at first lightly, then a little more energetically. Damis remained stock-still. He rubbed his temples, tickled the soles of his feet, pricked him with a needle. All in vain.

"What is wrong, Doctor?" I asked, jumping up. He did not answer, but pressed his ear against the heart, and applied a small metal object to the nostrils. He glared at me.

"What is the trouble?" I shouted. "Quick, tell me!"

"You have killed him. Your blood is poison," he hissed.

"I killed him! You scoundrel, it was your potion—"

"My potion?"

"Yes, your potion."

"The drug was harmless, mainly water."

I hurled him against the wall, where he crouched, groaning and grumbling, "Your blood is poison! Your blood is poison!"

I bent over Damis. His features were pinched and his limbs had already the rigidity of a corpse. "Damis,

Damis," I wept. "Damis, do you not hear me? Cartaphilus calls you, Damis—my friend!"

The physician did not dare to move from the spot. I rushed at him again. "Fool!" I shouted. "See what you have done! You have killed him! You have killed my friend!"

"How should I know that your blood is poison?"

"My blood is poison?"

"Look at him, look at your minion! He is turning black!"

It was true. I covered my face with my hands. *Your blood is poison!* The sentence maddened me. It seemed like the echo of another sentence years ago that had rung in my ears with the violence of a storm.

"Help me carry him out."

We placed the corpse upon a pile of wood, sprinkled it with perfumes and aromatics. The red fangs of the fire devoured the body of him to whom the gift of life was the gift of death.

I turned to go. The physician held my arm. "Go away!" I shouted. "Clumsy fool!"

"Am I to get no reward for my labors?"

I glared at him.

He followed me. "Master, Master! Are you breaking your promise?"

"What promise?"

"My fee!"

"Impudent wretch!" I walked on. He followed me, mumbling, "Was it my fault that your blood—"

Before he could finish the sentence, I struck him on the mouth. He fell. "You have killed me!" he shouted. I threw a purse at him. He rose, seized it, and ran off with the agility of a young animal.

10. GOD OR DEMON—PRINCE OF INDIA—MARCUS AURELIUS—JESUS IN THE PANTHEON

I DID NOT LEAVE my room for a long while. I do not know what perturbed me more: the loss of Damis, or the knowledge that my blood was accursed. Was I fated to slay those I loved? Was my love a serpent, whose fangs are fatal? Must I wander henceforth uncompanioned and loveless? I walked up and down my room, talking to myself in all the languages I knew.

It struck me that I did not even possess a language quite my own. "Who am I, what am I?" I shouted, and the walls answered, "Stranger! Wanderer!" I envied the pariah who dared to call himself by his true name, who could mention the place and date of his birth without fear or confusion.

Nothing consoled me save thought. This sharp blade that hurt most men, was like a cool, smooth hand caressing me. In reality, I found the great fiction which other people endeavor to snatch from illusion.

Cartaphilus, I said to myself, if your life is suitable only for a god or a demon—be a god or a demon!

I soon discovered that I was still human. Drouth was parching India. In vain the priests sacrificed victims to the implacable gods. Moved to pity, I tried my arts as a rainmaker. It was one of the lesser tricks which I had learned in the house of Apollonius. I do not know whether

natural causes or my incantations produced the rain, but I was regarded by the natives as their savior. This made my position unpleasantly conspicuous and aroused the jealousy of the rajah.

"Miraculous coincidences," he remarked to me, as he bade me farewell, "sometimes save the faces of prophets and of kings."

"Not only their faces," I replied, "but also their necks."

He smiled. . . .

Once more I stood at the crossroads on the outskirts of Rome. I remembered the remark of the man made to me long ago: "All roads lead to Rome." The man had turned to dust by this time; Nero, Poppaea, Sporus, Nero's golden house—all dust. But all roads still led to Rome, and I, Cartaphilus, was still living, still young! I felt exalted.

This time it pleased me to enter the Eternal City neither as a Roman citizen nor as a Jew. I was Car-ta-phal, a Hindu Prince. In a splendid chariot and dressed in the Hindu fashion, with a belt and a turban glittering with jewels, I dashed into Rome. The sparks danced about the hoofs of my horses like small stars, and the populace, blasé and sophisticated, gaped in awe and admiration. Their emperor was a philosopher affecting the black garb, but their instinct was for magnificence.

I succeeded in gaining the ear of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius by presenting him with rare manuscripts from the East. He invited me to hear him read one of his essays on virtue.

The reading room of the imperial palace was poorly lit. Marcus Aurelius could not endure any glaring light. The large statues about the walls mingled their shadows, making curious and grotesque patterns. The guests were reclining on the couches, or standing in small groups, talking. I walked from one statue to another, approaching or standing at a distance, feigning admiration. As a matter of fact, they were chiefly imitations from the Greek.

"Rome," sighed an elderly artist, Apollodorus the sculptor, "is no longer the Rome of our fathers. The Christians are destroying our love of beauty. Even," he whispered cautiously, "the imperator's philosophy has been influenced by them. They are really Hebrews, whose God hates images."

"Are the Hebrews a source of danger?"

"The Hebrews," he laughed, "are no longer a nation. Their capital was burned to the ground, and they were dispersed. It was about time."

"And their temple—I heard the Hebrews had a marvelous temple—"

"We are building a temple to Jove on its site. If I were not so old, I would be sent to administer the work."

I turned my face away. My eyes had filled with tears. Jerusalem . . . the temple . . . burned . . . and my people dispersed. All, all of us, wanderers like Cartaphilus!

The emperor entered, his arm about the waist of the empress. Everything was average about him. He was neither tall nor short; neither stocky nor thin; neither homely nor handsome. His hair was a mixture of gray and black, and his eyes were an indefinite brown that easily changed to gray. The empress, Faustina, on the contrary, had very pronounced features: a sharp nose, sharp chin and black eyes that seemed sharp as daggers. Her teeth, as she smiled, were white as a young animal's.

At the banquet, messengers from the north and east reached the emperor telling of the reverse of the Romans and the struggle with the barbarians.

Marcus Aurelius spoke of the superiority of virtue and intelligence over brute force.

"I long for peace, Car-ta-phal," he said to me. "Alas, the gods will it differently."

He lowered his head, and kept silent for a while. He liked to attitudinize. "Much worse than the barbarians are our enemies at home."

"The Christians?"

"Particularly the Christians. I have burned them and thrown them to the lions and hounded them as unclean beasts, but all my efforts have been in vain."

"Their religion, Your Majesty, glorifies martyrdom. If they are tortured to death, they are promised a whole eternity of pleasure in heaven. Who would not barter a few hours of agony for endless joy? The Christians, particularly, have the sense of the merchant. They were originally Hebrews."

"That is true. But how shall I exterminate them?"

"What is more damning than half-praise?"

"An excellent aphorism, Car-ta-phal, but I fail to discover its application."

He had already adapted several things I had said, and I knew that sooner or later my remark would appear in his meditations.

"Recognize Jesus as a minor divinity . . . some half-forgotten Hindu god."

"Perhaps," the imperator remarked, "he is a minor god. The world's imagination is stale. People rarely invent new gods."

"Your Majesty, why not admit Jesus officially to the Pantheon? Make him one of the gods, and he will be no longer the one god. Both Christians and Romans will forget their political grievances, buy sacrifices, and by invoking one additional divinity, will triumph against the barbarians."

"You are indeed my good counsellor, Car-ta-phal. I must propose your plan to the senate."

The temple was crowded with soldiers and women. The priests were busy taking offerings and sacrifices to the gods. Mars, above all, was invoked. But Venus was not neglected. It was difficult to push through the crowd, but I was obstinate. I would not leave the temple until I had seen the statue of the new god.

"Car-ta-phal," some one called. I managed to turn my head, but could not swing my shoulders about.

"Apollodorus."

"You are seeking what I seek, Car-ta-phal."

We reached an angle which had the shape of a large alcove. "This must be it," I said. Apollodorus, a little near-sighted, asked, "Which one?"

"The cross, look!"

He approached and looked intently. "What a hideous thing! A god upon a cross! A god with a writhing face and holes in his hands and feet! Car-ta-phal, it is horrible!"

Apollodorus laughed. "And I feared that Christianity would supplant our gods and our temples! A religion with a god on a cross, bleeding from his hands and his feet!"

I joined Apollodorus in laughter.

A woman, dressed in black, her face partly veiled, approached the cross, and knelt before it for a long while, then rose and, kissing the feet and hands, left.

"Apollodorus, we may still be wrong. We have forgotten woman. She is the mother. She pities. . . ."

11. THE EMPEROR-EMPRESS—HELIOGABALUS DANCES—THE GIANT

MARCUS AURELIUS was dead. Heliogabalus, the crowned transvestite, cuddled himself daintily on the throne of the Cæsars.

The people vociferated at the top of their voices that they were robbed to support an army too weak to cope with a band of undisciplined and uncouth barbarians, and a monarch—from the East—who danced and painted his lips. Foreigners preferred not to accept the honor of Roman citizenship, and many Romans pretended to have been born in the provinces, for the taxes imposed upon the citizens were much higher than those upon subjects.

The mother of the imperator was too hysterical and his ministers were too frivolous to govern; while he himself had become engrossed in the friendship for his adopted cousin, a taciturn young athlete, Bassianus Alexianus. His grandmother, however, who still retained a modicum of serenity and common sense, insisted that something had to be done, or the nation would rise in rebellion.

"What?" Heliogabalus shouted, exasperated.

"Augustus, High Priest of the Eternal Sun, man appreciates an unexpected gift a great deal more than that which is due him."

The emperor made no comment, but turned to me with the smile of a young coquette.

I remained silent.

He sighed, moved with profound pity for himself when I failed to respond. His effeminacy was too grotesque to intrigue me.

"Her Majesty's logic is convincing," I remarked, somewhat flatly.

"I hate logic." Heliogabalus placed his small, soft hand upon his cousin's shoulder.

"We are all children, Augustus," the old empress continued, "and children must be placated with gifts."

"What shall I give them?"

"Your ancestors used to give them the circus, but they are bored with the games."

"What shall I give them?"

"Your ancestors waged wars and returned triumphant, followed by captive kings and princes and chariots overbrimming with precious jewels and gold."

The emperor's face, delicate and small, flushed. His nostrils shivered and his lips, fleshy but well-chiseled, lengthened in disdain. "I hate war! It is the work of butchers and cutthroats." And addressing Bassianus, he continued: "Not that I dislike blood. The High Priest of the Sun knows the beauty of sacrifice. But it must be shed delicately, at leisure, amidst joy and merriment. Blood, like wine, should be drunk out of golden goblets. Am I not right, Bassianus?"

He rose coyly from his throne, arranged the folds of his robe, and reseated himself.

"Augustus," the old woman began once more, "since you will not give them wars, give them baths."

"Baths?"

"It is a Roman fad. The physicians claim that bathing keeps people young. Everybody wishes to be young. Give them the baths. The water may quench the smouldering fire."

"The old woman is clever, Bassianus. Shall I give them the baths?"

Bassianus nodded.

"Let them have the baths."

"The gods are with the imperator. The sun shines upon his High Priest!"

A holiday to last three days was proclaimed. Roman citizens were invited to take possession of their new baths, the magnificent gift of their incomparable emperor. Day

and night the stones were to be kept hot that the steam might rise, dense as smoke; and the pools were to be replenished with spring water that the bodies might be refreshed and rejuvenated. Wine, too, was to be distributed without measure, and enormous piles of wreaths were at the disposal of the merrymakers.

Rome had not been so joyous for a long time, and the emperor, just turned eighteen, wished to partake of the gayety. He dressed himself in a flowing toga, embroidered with gold and studded with tiny jewels, which reached the ground in the manner of the robes worn by patrician women. Upon his head he placed a wreath of fresh roses. His fingers were covered with rings, and his arms were wound with long bracelets, the shape of fantastic snakes and grotesque crocodiles.

"Any one recognizing me forfeits his life!" he exclaimed.

The moon, large and white, was encircled by an enormous aureole. Its reflection silvered a large part of the pool and overbrimmed the bank.

The people shouted, "No torches! No torches! It is light enough." The torchbearers blew out their lights.

The emperor threw off the linen blanket which dried his body and warmed him, when he came out of the pool.

"I am the brother of the sun. I am the sister of the moon!" he exclaimed.

The people laughed.

"Let there be music that I may dance!"

"Your Majesty," a senator whispered in his ear, "I fear—"

"Tomorrow you die, wretch!"

The emperor danced. He did not stir from the spot in the reflection, turning only his torso, delicate as a girl's and twisting his arms in the manner of the orientals. The slow sensuous movements became more and more rapid, more and more irregular, until they seemed the mad paroxysm of uncontrollable passion. The moon wound about him like a white veil, torn in spots and blown by the wind. The people clapped their hands and stamped their feet, shouting from time to time, "Magnificent! Fine! Fine!"

The music became more clamorous.

The emperor breathed heavily through his open mouth. His movements slackened, became disjointed. Exhausted, Heliogabalus fell, suddenly, his head between his hands.

The people laughed, applauded, made obscene remarks, and dispersed. One man placed a wreath upon the imperator's head. "Terpsichore, Queen of the Dance!" he exclaimed.

Heliogabalus raised his head. A few steps away, he beheld a man of gigantic stature staring at him. The imperator frowned. The man lifted his powerful arm slowly, and waved his immense forefinger commandingly.

Heliogabalus rose, fascinated. The man continued to motion to him. The emperor made a movement to withdraw, but something mightier than his will kept him nailed to the spot.

The two stared at each other, the giant's eyes small but very sharp, stabbing the large dreamy eyes of the boy. The latter lowered his lids. The silent battle lasted for some time.

What strange premonition troubled the emperor? What stranger power overcame fear, anger, disdain? Heliogabalus, like a girl in a trance, like a bird spellbound by the glittering eyes of his ancestral foe, approached the giant, making slow, indeterminate steps.

"Come!" the giant whispered.

Heliogabalus wavered.

"Come!" he said, and placing his large hand upon the emperor's shoulder, pulled him gently.

They walked toward a dark corner—two shadows, one long and broad, the other short and rotund, preceding them.

An hour later a sharp shriek pierced the air, like the cry of a murdered bird.

Cruelly lacerated, crushed by gigantic hands, the body of Heliogabalus, the master-mistress, the emperor-empress of Rome, brother to the sun and sister to the moon, was found in a pool made scarlet by his blood.

"I shall not die tomorrow!" breathed the senator, leaning upon my arm.

12. I BECOME A GOD—I MAKE A SAINT—MAN OR MONKEY—KOTIKOKURA

AGAIN I turned my steps to the East. After a long sojourn at Palmyra, it pleased my fancy to bury myself in the desert. I amused myself by teaching a parrot to pronounce my name, "Car-ta-phal."

"Carr-tarr-pharr" the bird shrieked back.

Tempted to face fate alone, I dismissed my retinue.

Toward dusk, I was within sight of what seemed to be a village or the home of some tribe. My only companions were my camel and my parrot, which had become quite tame, and perching upon the animal's head, formed a bizarre and radiant crest. I waited until it was dark. Meanwhile, I drew upon the center of my turban the shape of the sun and a large crescent moon upon the camel's forehead; while the beak of the parrot I dotted with many points to represent the stars.

Around the fire, in a wide circle, men and women were squatting, their heads bent. Their backs were black, and in many cases, scarred with wounds. At an angle, a white-haired man was beating ceaselessly a large kettle, with an iron stick, growling at intervals. My approach was unnoticed until my parrot called out: "Carr-tarr-pharr."

The natives jumped up: men with colossal mouths and jaws and tiny eyes, and women with enormous breasts that fell below their big, circular bellies.

"Carr-tarr-pharr! Carr-tarr-pharr . . ."

They seemed paralyzed. The chemical I had applied

to my turban and to my companions, was shining like a white fire. A woman shrieked and groveled at the feet of my camel. The rest did likewise. Soon the entire tribe prostrated themselves before me.

Weary at last of this adoration, I motioned my worshipers to rise. I spoke to them in a dozen languages. They did not understand.

The old man who had been beating the kettle looked at the sky, then at me, and bowed very deeply. I understood that he meant that I was heaven-descended. I nodded. He no doubt thought of me in terms of both the camel and the parrot. I was one, and yet three. It was an amusing idea, which pleased me greatly.

"Carr-tarr-pharr! Carr-tarr-pharr . . ."

They imitated him: "Ca-ta-pha . . . Ca-ta-pha."

My parrot was making my name divine, and no doubt immortal, but by the time it was uttered by these enormous mouths, it was hardly recognizable.

When I had learned sufficient of the language, I engaged in conversation with the white-haired man. "Who is your god?" I asked.

"Ca-ta-pha."

"But before he came among you, who was your god?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and his large mouth opened as if to swallow an enormous piece of meat. "Ca-ta-pha is our god."

I gave him a gold coin. He did not know its significance, but his joy in receiving it was immense. He shouted: "God Ca-ta-pha has given me the sun."

I thought, "You are doing the universal dance of the golden calf, my poor gorilla!"

Ever after, he was considered as a saint by the rest, who trembled at his approach.

I was the mighty god of war. Marching at the head of my people, I vanquished tribe after tribe. At the sight of me, our enemies either ran madly away, leaving behind them booty and food, or falling upon their faces, accepted my divinity, and relinquished their independence. My tribe became rich beyond its wildest dream. The smoke, thick with the smell of animals roasting, mounted like an endless offering to the Lord of Bounties.

I grew weary of hearing my name invoked several times a day at the caprice of the parrot, and seeing the

black bodies surround me, faces in the mud, and posteriors raised upward like hillocks. I realized why the gods prefer the tops of mountains, or the sky.

But a god must disappear, as he appeared, suddenly and unexpectedly. On the morning decided upon, I ordered my tribe to go into the woods, and not to budge until the moon rose. They fell on their faces. "Rise! Fear not. No harm shall befall you."

As they were about to turn away, one of them shouted: "Look! Look! Ko-ti-ko-ku-ra! Ko-ti-ko-ku-ra!"

My parrot repeated, "Korr-ti-korr-kurr-ra . . ."

Was it a man, or a monkey? I could not tell. His face was much lighter than those of the others, almost yellow; the features were much finer; but his body was covered with a heavy black fur, and his back was bent, as if he preferred to walk on all fours. Several men dashed upon him and I saw that they were on the point of tearing him to pieces. His hazel brown eyes blazed defiance.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Do not touch him! Bring him here! Who is he?"

"Ko-ti-ko-ku-ra . . . Ko-ti-ko-ku-ra . . ."

It was only after much difficulty that I finally grasped the trend of his chatter. Kotikokura meant "accursed." This interested me. He had laughed, it seems, at one of their elders, who had prophesied no less a fact than the arrival of Ca-ta-pha. I realized that the exact nature of his crime had been forgotten, but that he was, nevertheless, Kotikokura, the accursed one who laughed.

I looked at him again. His eyes danced to and fro, like two enormous fireflies.

"Let him remain with me! I shall devour him myself. Go to the woods at once, and do not return till you see the moon!"

You are like Cartaphilus, Kotikokura, I thought. We ought to be good company for each other.

I touched his face, and looked into his small phosphorescent eyes that moved incessantly. "Would you care to accompany Ca-ta-pha the god?"

He continued to grin, but he made no answer. Had he understood me? Could he speak? It did not matter. His muscles looked like iron, and I needed a servant. "Come along!" The camel galloped, but Kotikokura ran still faster, and the parrot screeched, as he flew over our heads: "Carr-tarr-pharr. . . ."

13. KOTIKOKURA SHAVES—I MAKE HISTORY—THE CROSS AND THE SWORD—THE CHRISTIAN EMPEROR—THE CRESCENT MOON HANGS UPON THE BOSPHORUS

KOTIKOKURA understood me in whatever language I spoke. Was he a linguist, or merely an animal, sensitive to the tone of my voice and the change in my features? His answers were a grin, a growl, some inarticulate sounds, or a movement of the shoulders and head.

"Kotikokura, we are going into civilization. You must look civilized." He grinned. "I shall teach you how to shave the few threads of hair on your face, and the fur upon your arms and chest, at least. Also, you must get accustomed to wearing clothes, according to the country you happen to be in. The meaning of civilization is to look like the rest."

He still grinned. His eyes looked here and there. He was on the point of dropping upon his palms. "Be thou erect, or be made erect! So said an emperor, Kotikokura —an emperor who was also a philosopher, which is an extremely rare thing."

Kotikokura stiffened up, his head thrown back.

"Not quite so much, Kotikokura. Man should not be always looking at the stars. One's eyes should watch the solid earth. All good things grow out of the earth, Kotikokura; the stars generate mad dreams, harmful for those who harbor them."

A man was standing upon the steps leading to the Capitol. About him was gathered a large multitude. Some shouted: "Maxentius! Maxentius!" Others, in greater numbers, drowned their voices: "Constantine! Constantine!"

"He alone will rule who believes in Jesus!" exclaimed the man, making the sign of the cross. "The cross shall conquer!"

I saw many crossing themselves; others frowned; some grumbled, but no one hissed him.

"Is Jesus the new god of war? Has Mars been replaced?" I asked.

"Jesus is the only god. The rest are idols."

Not even this answer disturbed the populace.

"Is not Jesus one of the gods of the Pantheon?"

"Jesus is god of the world, and he who believes in Jesus shall conquer the world."

I made a careful investigation of the military situation. Constantine was stronger and cleverer than Maxentius, it was universally recognized. The armies of both leaders were encamped within three or four miles of Rome, and it was but a matter of days now before they would strike the final blow. I decided to join Constantine.

"It is always advisable, Kotikokura, to side with the strong, for the gods favor them." He grinned and bowed. I had taught him by this time the necessary rules of etiquette. He learned very rapidly, and imitated perfectly.

"He who draws the sword shall perish by the sword," Jesus taught. Did not this also refer to nations and religions? If Constantine should win because he had drawn the sword in the name of Christianity, should not Christianity perish by the same gesture?

"Things are most illogical, Kotikokura, and yet, an intelligent man must act as if life were governed by reason."

I shaved Kotikokura's back, and blackened it. Upon it, with my chemical, I drew the sign of the cross, and underneath it, I wrote: *In hoc signo vinces!* "In this sign thou shalt conquer." I ordered him to dress again. "Kotikokura, I am making you immortal, perhaps." His back itched him, and he scratched himself. "No, you must not do that until I allow you." He bowed.

The hillock that faced Constantine's army was almost perpendicular, and terminated in a sharp point. The night was darker than usual. "Things favor us, Kotikokura. I

depend upon your agility. Climb the hill, and stand with your back turned. Do not move until I call you. I shall remain at the base."

In a few moments, Kotikokura appeared upon the peak, or rather merely the cross and the words I had written. They dazzled and shivered against the sky like a new and splendid constellation. I was almost prompted myself to bend my knee in adoration and exclaim: "I believe!"

Suddenly Constantine's camp flamed with the lights of many torches. I knew that Kotikokura's back had accomplished its work. "Come down, Kotikokura!" Almost instantly, as if he had flown, Kotikokura stood grinning before me. I ordered him to dress again, and follow me home.

Near the Capitol, many people were kneeling. I asked the reason for it.

"Have you not seen the great miracle?"

"What great miracle?"

"The sky shone with stars in the shape of the cross."

"Really?"

"I have never seen or heard of such a marvelous thing."

"I am a Roman. I believed in the gods of my forefathers, but this very hour I have become a Christian."

"The whole world shall become Christian now, for do not the same stars shine everywhere, and who, having seen what we have seen, will continue to doubt?"

I felt uneasy. Had my ruse defeated my very purpose? "We shall see, Kotikokura, if a religion that preaches love can long exist by the sword." Kotikokura grinned, and scratched himself violently. "You may scratch as much as you wish now. You have become history."

I bent over the balustrade of my balcony. To my right, the Bosphorus rose in jerky waves, tipped with foam, like some angry giant cat spitting; to my left an immense cross of gold glittered over the ancient Greek temple; while below me, massed on both sides of the street, the multitude awaited the emperor's arrival at the New Rome, Constantinople. The silver trumpets and the cymbals could already be heard by the keener ears. People exclaimed: "They are coming!" in Greek, Latin, and several dialects.

Immediately behind the trumpeters, who served primarily to disperse the crowds, came with deliberate steps

the Christian High Priest, recently appointed by Constantine. He was dressed in a white silk robe with gold stripes; in his right hand he carried a large golden crucifix, studded with precious stones, the gift of the emperor. He seemed to be of pure Roman blood, and looked more like a soldier than a martyr or a man versed in the mysteries of the spirit. On either side two boys were scattering incense, and behind him about forty or fifty priests, in white silk robes, but without the gold stripes, and carrying crosses, chanted an old Hebrew homily in Latin words.

Although doubtless many of the spectators were not Christians, everybody made the sign of the cross. Had not the imperator proclaimed Christianity the state religion? Besides, there was a rumor that the priests employed spies, and that unbelievers were to expect punishments as severe as the Christians had received at their hands, when the Roman gods were in power.

Several officers of the imperial guard, erect and almost motionless on their horses, carried tall banners on which were painted the cross with the words: *In hoc signo vinces.*

"Kotikokura!" He appeared almost instantly. "Look! Do you remember?" His eyes darted to and fro. "The cross . . . have you forgotten?" He did not understand. I burst out laughing. "Of course not. How could you remember? You never saw it! You flamed like a heaven, but you only saw the darkness in front of you." Kotikokura grinned.

The emperor, reclining upon a couch, a diadem upon his head and a mass of jewels upon his hands and arms, was carried by four giants. *Vivat imperator! Vivat!*

The great dark hand of night covered the Bosphorus and hid the cross upon the Greek temple. Over it hung, like a scimitar, the crescent moon, tipped with a star.

14. MY VINEYARD ON THE RHINE—ULRICA—ROME IS A WITCH JEALOUS OF YOUTH—THE WALLS OF CHINA—I DO A MIRACLE—A CHINESE APOLLONIUS—FLOWER-OF-JOY

The Rhine barely stirred, and our boat glided upon it, lightly, like a giant feather dropped by some mythological eagle. For a long time, I continued to see the tall, wooden fence that surrounded my vineyards. I remembered the dingy shop of my father and the poverty I had endured in my childhood. My present wealth delighted me, like the fragrant wines that my slaves squeezed out of the grapes.

In a corner of the boat, Kotikokura curled up like a dog, his face turned toward the sun.

Ulrica sang. Her golden hair, coiled into two heavy braids, whose tips rested on her lap, shone like the sun that was setting in back of us. Whom did she resemble? Mary? Perhaps. But she was not as voluptuous. Lydia? She was as sentimental and tender, but at unexpected moments, too haughty or too timid—a little incomprehensible, like the woods she came from.

"Ulrica, in Rome they would call you a barbarian."

"Rome!" she sneered. "Rome is an old witch, jealous of youth."

"Have you not heard, dear, that Rome is eternal?"

"The city may be eternal, but the people are dying."

"What makes you think that the people are dying?"

"Rome sneers at virtue, Cartaphilus, and no longer believes in the gods."

"Rome believes in a new god, Ulrica."

"How can a god be new, Cartaphilus? Are not gods older than heaven and earth?"

"You called me a god, Ulrica, many years ago, in a faraway country. Do you remember?"

"I never traveled to a faraway country—and many years ago? I was not born then, Cartaphilus." She placed her head upon my knee.

"You were a princess then, Ulrica."

"And did you love me then, Cartaphilus?"

"I loved you then."

"Do you love me now?"

"I love you now."

"Cartaphilus . . . make me your wife . . . again."

It was true—Rome was dying. The barbarians were becoming more and more daring. Some day, I was certain, they would attempt to capture the Eternal City. My vineyards lay between them and Rome. The boots of the conquerors spare nothing. A Roman, formerly the governor of one of the provinces in Asia-Minor, more confident than I in the prowess of his country's army, bought my property.

"Ulrica, I shall soon leave. Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"Perhaps to Rome . . . perhaps to some farther country. I do not know."

She shook her head. "I belong in the woods."

"Think it over, my dear. We shall not leave for a few days."

"I will not go." She walked away.

Kotikokura approached me, out of breath, and pulled my arm.

"What is the trouble, Kotikokura? What has happened?"

He uttered some sounds which I could not understand, but I noticed that his hands were covered with blood. "What's happened? Quick, tell me!"

He pulled me. "Ulrica! Ulrica!"

Ulrica lay upon the ground, her head thrown back. A stream of blood was flowing out of her chest, passing over her arm and one of her braids, and making a large,

red pool that separated into several branches. In her right hand she held a short sword.

"Ulrica! Ulrica!" I bent over her. She opened her eyes, already blurred. "Cartaphilus," she whispered, "when I was a princess, did I also kill myself?"

"I do not know, Ulrica. I went away."

"You always go away."

"I am he who wanders forever, Ulrica."

She was about to say something, when her mouth filled with blood.

Kotikokura, bent almost to the ground, groaned.

"Come, Kotikokura. You must be a man. Men suffer less noisily." He stood up and stared at me. "Or perhaps, a man should not suffer at all, seeing that he deals with mere shadows that flit across a frozen river."

To be a Roman was no longer an incomparable honor; no longer a magic word with which to conjure safety and protection. To be a member of any of the barbarian tribes, however, was just as precarious. To be a Hebrew meant nothing. People had almost forgotten about Jerusalem or Judea. The cross might incur favor or animosity; the ancient gods likewise. The boundaries were no longer well defined; the roads no longer led to accustomed and secure spots.

"What shall we be, Kotikokura, as we travel through this cauldron of uncertainty?"

Kotikokura scratched himself. It was his manner of indicating doubt or unconcern.

"Kotikokura, we must change our identity as the chameleon changes the color of its skin, remaining nevertheless, unchanged. Let us not seem strong enough to provoke conflict, nor too weak to defend ourselves. Mediocrity, Kotikokura, is the salt of the earth. In mediocrity, all things flourish. Below it they wither; above it they are struck by lightning."

Kotikokura's eyes slacked their pace.

"If you are a giant, Kotikokura, you must not rise to your full stature in public, or else the others will become weary of craning their necks to see you, and sooner or later they will chop your head off that they may equal you in size."

Standing near the wall, it was impossible to see the top. It seemed to melt into the sky. We moved away.

"Kotikokura, man is tiny, but he builds high walls. There is a gate a little farther on. Watchman's eyes are generally weak, and they close at the glitter of gold."

The gate was narrow, and two yellow giants blocked its passage. At the sight of us, they pointed their long spears. I dropped, as if by error, a handful of gold coins. They looked, but never deigned to stir. They grumbled something which I could not understand, the tone of which, however, augured anything but hospitality.

I looked into the eyes of the one who seemed a trifle more pacific. I waved my hands about his face, and pronounced, "Sleep," in Chinese, which I had learnt before my arrival. "Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep!" The giant began to yawn. "Sleep . . . sleep." He stretched out upon the ground and began to snore. The other, frightened, dropped his spear and ran away.

"Come, Kotikokura, let us enter."

The wall was several feet deep, and when we reached the other end, people were running toward us, weapons in their hands, and shouting.

"Lie down, Kotikokura, and do not budge. Fear nothing!" I covered him with a black cloth. I waved my arms, describing large semicircles, reciting dramatically stanzas from the Upanishads. Two small mirrors concealed in my palms, reflecting the sun, made strange patterns of light. The people, disconcerted, watched.

"Rise, Kotikokura!" I commanded. "Rise!" The body of Kotikokura ascended slowly, steadily. The people, their mouth agape, dropped their weapons. "Return, Kotikokura!" I ordered. The tips of my fingers united. The mirrors shed a milky way, through which Kotikokura descended slowly, almost elegantly. When he reached the ground, I uncovered him. He looked about, startled, and fell at my feet, calling: "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!" The others knelt also, and repeated, "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!"

"Go back!" I commanded, pointing with my forefinger. The crowd obeyed.

One elderly man, only, remained. He was dressed in a many-colored silk robe. I bowed to him.

"My esteemed friend," he said, smiling, "the levitation was beautifully done. I have read about this strange phenomenon, but I have never had the pleasure of witnessing it."

"I am happy to meet so wise a man."

"Wisdom is a rare flower. It is sufficient for a man to just breathe a little of its exquisite perfume."

"I have read the words of Kong-Fu-tze, the greatest of philosophers. Anxious to meet the people whom he taught so wisely, I risked my life and the life of my faithful servant."

The Chinese's lips curled into a smile. "Accept the hospitality of my humble roof."

I bowed, and thanked him profusely. "I am most anxious to be converted to the teaching of Kong-Fu-tze."

"Kong-Fu-tze desires no converts. It suffices to quaff his wisdom. . . ."

Apollonius! I thought suddenly, except for the slanting eyes—the tall stature, the white beard, the slow intelligent gestures of the arms are unmistakable. . . . I scrutinized him. He smiled politely.

"Forgive me," I said, "your words recalled and recaptured the voice of a friend. . . ."

My host begged me to make myself comfortable in his library.

We smoked.

I watched the smoke, my eyes half closed. The shadow it threw upon the opposite wall assumed the shape of a woman.

"Are the women of your country desirous to afford pleasure?"

"The wiser ones among them make a devout study of the ways of pleasure."

"I should like to meet such a student."

"You shall, Cartaphilus."

She pushed gently the door of my room and looked in. I pretended to be asleep. She entered, and on tiptoes, much lighter than a cat, approached me. With the corner of one eye I observed her—a tiny creature with a face hardly larger than a doll's, illumined by two long eyes that seemed to be dreaming something weird, or merely reflecting the strange smile that appeared and vanished in rapid succession about her mouth.

I opened my eyes. She bowed. "Has Flower-of-Joy disturbed Cartaphilus, Master of Wisdom?"

"Flower-of-Joy has entered more gently than a ray of the sun, and disturbed Cartaphilus no more than the

perfume that leaves the heart of a flower and mingles with the air he breathes."

"Cartaphilus is beautiful and wise and Flower-of-Joy fears she cannot delight him."

"Her very presence is a great delight to him."

"Flower-of-Joy is a little tired. May she lie down with Cartaphilus?"

"Flower-of-Joy will be as a dainty dream that visits him in his sleep."

She was a bit of chiseled ivory, animated by the seven devils that Jesus drove out of Magdalene.

Like a labyrinth made of deeply perfumed flowers, within which one wanders certain at every turn to discover an issue, but always finding that it is merely another bend, was the pleasure she afforded me.

Mung Ling greeted me, as always, most cordially. He apologized for having sent me an inexperienced girl.

"Inexperienced?"

He smiled, closing his eyes. "When I was a young man, Cartaphilus, and lived in the capital, pursuing my studies, I discovered the meaning of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged . . ."

I thought it was merely an old man's exaggeration of his youthful delights, but nevertheless decided to visit the capital. "Unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged!" His words stirred ancient echoes in my brain. My thoughts returned to Jerusalem. I heard Aurelia's soft voice insinuate the very phrase.

"Your fine phrase is worth a long trip, excellent Mung Ling," I remarked.

15. TAXES AND PLAGUES—A PRISONER OF ATTILA—TWO MEN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

THE PEOPLE were clamorous in their complaints against the tax collectors. The harvests had been very poor, but neither the governor nor his subordinates showed any clemency. Even the few fistfuls of rice and the small portions of dried, salted fish were dwindling from the hands of the coolies and the small merchants. Many refused to work. If it was one's fate to starve, why add to it the pain of labor?

The governor sought to subdue them by force. He imprisoned whole families; sold children into servitude; put men to torture. It was rumored—hardly above a whisper, but which chilled like the half-motionless shadow of a venomous snake—that some men and women had died of the plague.

"What should a man do, Mung Ling—stay among the people or go away?"

"Kong-Fu-tze the Incomparable said that when law and order prevail in the empire, the man of sincerity and love is in evidence. When it is without law and order, he withdraws. It is time for us to separate, alas! You must go, dear friend."

We came upon smoking villages and weary women. The steeds of war were stamping through the land. Our guide, a servant of Mung Ling, deserted us to save his wife and his children.

He kissed my hands, and weeping, galloped back.

We found ourselves in the midst of a camp of soldiers. We were immediately surrounded, and ordered to dismount. Our hands were tied behind our backs by heavy ropes. Kotikokura's legs were restless. He bent, ready to run away.

"Do not budge! Ca-ta-pha is with you!"

We were ordered to wait. Two soldiers stood guard. The others went away, to report to their superiors. Kotikokura grumbled. "Silence!" I commanded. I wished to know in what camp I found myself, who was the leader, and whom they were fighting. With this information, I could easily extricate myself.

I smiled to one of the soldiers. "It is strange that you treat as enemy the friend of your master."

"What! Are you the friend of King Attila?"

"Of course, valiant soldier."

"Are you not the emperor's spy?"

I laughed. "Would a spy ride as leisurely into the enemy's camp as I did? Would a spy travel unarmed?"

The soldiers seemed uncertain, but more kindly disposed. One of them said: "But if you *are* the emperor's spy, you will learn the meaning of torture." The other grinned.

Attila was sitting at a long table, making drawings upon white silk. He placed his chin upon the hilt of his sword, and looked at me. His mustaches, uniting with his beard, hung heavy and low on either side of his face, and his long teeth shone like the ivory tusks of an elephant in the sun. I was determined to employ hypnotism, if necessary, to safeguard myself, but it amused me to try my skill without relying upon occult psychic forces.

"What is your name?"

"Cartaphilus, Your Majesty."

"Where do you come from?"

"I come from many lands."

"What sort of countries are they, Cartaphilus?"

"They are countries with noble and heroic histories . . . but on the verge of ruin."

"Why?"

"Corruption, vice and a false religion called Christianity."

Attila rose, and walked up and down the room. He

was tall and rather heavy. The skin of his face was a few shades lighter than that of his soldiers and his cheekbones were somewhat less protruding.

"I, too, have no country. I am not absolutely certain who my people are. Cartaphilus, he who does not possess a country must make one for himself—"

"Or else," I interjected, "wander . . . always a stranger in every land."

Attila pulled at his beards.

"Conquer Rome, Sire! Destroy her false, pale-faced god. The Mistress of the World is too old, and Christianity too young, to withstand a determined blow."

The king drew circles upon the silk in front of him. "China is at my feet. I could proclaim myself emperor . . . but I hate walls!"

"For a great general, it must be exasperating to find a nation too easily conquered!"

"Cartaphilus, you fathom my feelings. . . . I love valor and glory and hard combat." He stamped his sword.

"The Romans still love glory, and Christianity is ambitious."

"These people send messengers at my approach and beg me to be their ruler. I cannot fight open doors. . . ."

"The doors of the Romans are still locked. Your sword shall rattle against them like a thunderclap."

At dawn, I was ordered to appear again before the king.

"Cartaphilus, heaven has sent me a sign . . . this golden chain shall bind at my feet . . . the world beyond the wall."

I bowed reverently.

"Stay with me, Cartaphilus. Teach me the roads. Draw the maps for me. Attila is not the leader of wild hordes, but the ruler of a disciplined army."

Jesus of Nazareth, I thought, You have vanquished Julian the Apostate. Attila shall conquer you!

For three days three ambassadors of the emperor begged in vain to be admitted to the presence of Attila. The king had not yet finished his plans: my map was not yet completed. Finally, at my intervention, he consented to see them and concluded a truce with the Son of Heaven.

The ambassadors were on the point of leaving when I begged them to remain a while longer.

"Attila, magnanimous monarch, may I speak?"

"Speak!"

"If Cartaphilus has helped to save the Celestial Empire, may he travel unmolested from province to province?"

One of the mandarins extended his arm, the rim of the sleeve touching his large ring, whose soft glittering harmonized with the sheen of the silk. "Cartaphilus shall be our honored guest."

"May he enter the capital?"

"The gates will swing wide open."

Attila's voice was as gentle as a woman's. "Cartaphilus, you must go, even as I must go, that is true. In you, my unrest has a brother. Three days, however, you must spend with me. Three days we shall spend in revelry. Then I shall go forth to conquer the world."

The mandarin bowed very deeply before me, his hand heavy with jewels, upon his chest.

I smiled.

"In the capital, Cartaphilus, my excellent friend, you are my guest. Meanwhile, we can travel at leisure. I have already sent several messengers at top speed to inform the emperor of the good news. I have asked him to make Cartaphilus a Mandarin of the First Order."

He presented me with a transparent red ruby, as large as a sparrow's egg.

"The honor is too great."

"It is not a question of honor, excellent friend, but of comfort . . . and elegance."

16. UNENDURABLE PLEASURE INDEFINITELY PROLONGED—THE LORD PROCURER TO THE SON OF HEAVEN—FLOWER-OF-THE-EVENING—THE PALACE OF PLEASURE AND PAIN—I SEEK PERFECTION—SA-LO-ME

"UNENDURABLE PLEASURE indefinitely prolonged?" To Fo smiled. Our cups, lighter than lotus leaves, were filled once more with tcha, whose perfume delighted our nostrils while its color soothed our eyes, "Cartaphilus, I know who will best afford you what you desire."

"To Fo is a peerless host."

"The Mistress of the Palace of Pleasure and the Palace of Pain is my friend. She is beautiful and very clever. Since the age of ten she has been a profound student of the mystery of the senses. Because of her great talents, I advised His Majesty to appoint her the teacher of the large harem and also of the small harem, which must not be mentioned in public, under penalty of death, and which is guarded by two regiments of giant eunuchs. I am the Lord Procurer of the Son of Heaven. . . ."

I bowed profoundly. He clapped his hands. A slave fell on his face. "Go tell Flower-of-the-Evening that your master will visit her shortly."

Flower-of-the-Evening raised her head, then bent over me, her small round breasts perfumed with the essence of two hundred flowers.

"Has Flower-of-the-Evening pleased Cartaphilus?"

I bowed assent.

"My pupils, gratified, plucked for you the fruit from the tree of pleasure that is within easy reach. . . . In the subtler arts, where the line between pleasure and torture is finer than the wing of a butterfly, Flower-of-the-Evening trusted only herself. . . ."

Flower-of-the-Evening unlocked for me the secret gardens of delight. . . . Her hands, tiny as the petals of a delicate, yellow rose, caressed me.

"Has Cartaphilus known pleasure more delectable than my caress?"

"He has not," I lied.

"We have exhausted the two hundred and sixty ways of love, Cartaphilus. I have revealed to you the thirteen ways that are known only to the emperor . . . but I have not revealed the ultimate secret.

"Cartaphilus, Flower-of-the-Evening knows seven more ways of pleasure, ways that are unknown even to the emperor himself—the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged." She stopped to see the effect of her words upon me. "I have kept the secret as a nuptial gift for my lover."

Her hands continued to caress me.

"Cartaphilus, no mere man could dwell unscathed in the Palace of Pain and the Palace of Pleasure uninterruptedly for seven months as you have done. A giant would have perished on the wheels of its pleasure; its pain, no less exquisite, would turn a demigod into a wraith of himself. Whence do you draw your strength? Who are you?"

"I am . . . Cartaphilus."

"No . . . you are more than Cartaphilus . . . you are . . . a god . . . or a demon."

I laughed

"Cartaphilus, do you not desire to discover the seven ultimate ways of pleasure, the final essence of the perfume of joy? Flower-of-the-Evening shall teach you the secret ways of love . . . but Cartaphilus must initiate Flower-of-the-Evening into his secret."

"What secret?"

"How to remain young always, and always strong, and always beautiful."

"How should he know all that?"

"He knows! He knows!"

I remembered how I answered the hetaera of Jerusa-

lem, and how she fled out of the room, insulting and cursing me. The intervening centuries had taught me better. I was determined to learn the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged.

"I know, it is true, and I shall teach you how to remain always young, always strong, always beautiful."

She clapped her hands, and pressed herself upon me.

"Flower-of-the-Evening will startle her master with unimaginable delight."

We remained silent for a while.

"What is the drug, Cartaphilus?"

"Not a drug. Drugs are but man's invention. A god needs no drugs."

She listened, her mouth open.

I whispered mysteriously. "Every seven years Cartaphilus shall visit Flower-of-the-Evening at the first hour of dawn. Every seven years Cartaphilus shall renew with his caress the beauty and strength and youth of Flower-of-the-Evening."

For seven days Flower-of-the-Evening taught me the seven ultimate ways of love and the meaning of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged. Each day wrenched a sharper pain into a more exquisite joy.

To Fo congratulated me. "Flower-of-the-Evening is generally inclined to be cynical about men, but she speaks of you with unequivocal satisfaction."

We smoked our pipes and drank the delicate tcha.

"Are there no other ways of delighting the senses, admirable To Fo?"

To Fo laughed. "What joy does Cartaphilus seek that Flower-of-the-Evening and her garden cannot afford?"

"I seek unimaginable perfection."

To Fo, playing with his beard, remained silent for a long while. Did he understand?

"In my youth, Cartaphilus, I heard of a woman, a goddess, who was perfection . . . the embodiment of all men's dreams."

"Yes?" I said anxiously.

"She was old as the Black Mountain, and as young as the first ray of dawn. Witch or goddess, she passed from country to country. He or she who had the incomparable fortune of meeting her knew the meaning of heaven. But all this is merely legend, Cartaphilus."

"What was her name?"

"She had many names, as she wandered through the ages. Many have called her Lilith and Ashtoreth, but the name she loved best was Sa-lo-me."

"Sa-lo-me!"

The cup fell out of my hand and broke.

To Fo smiled. "Her very name makes our hands tremble, Cartaphilus." After a while he resumed: "The cup always slips—and it always breaks."

"Kotikokura, we have been long enough in Cathay. Our friends are aging rapidly; Flower-of-the-Evening has noticed a gray hair in her head; the people have forgotten Attila and the events that invested me with a red ruby and the rank of a Mandarin of the First Order. A guest should leave before the host begins to yawn. Besides, my friend, Salome is probably in the West. You do not know Salome? She is the Daughter of Night! She is cruel and beautiful, and disdainful! Like the queen bee, she destroys those whom she loves!"

Kotikokura grinned.

"She is Lilith, perhaps—mother of demons, or Ashtoreth, goddess of love! We must seek her, Kotikokura."

Kotikokura placed his hands into his wide sleeves, and bowed. . . .

To Fo accompanied us for several miles. The sun was about to set. He gave me a letter sealed with the grand seal of the Dragon from the Son of Heaven, exhorting his fellow sovereigns, as well as his subjects, to respect my wishes.

"Cartaphilus, best of friends, now and then when you will see the sun disappear, drink a cup of wine to To Fo."

17. IN QUEST OF THE PRINCESS—MOON, TORTOISE, OR WITCH?—THE PRINCESS SALOME—ORGY—THE ULTIMATE PORTAL—KOTIKOKURA'S ADVENTURE

My eyes sought the faces of all the women I met. Is this Salome? Or this one? Kotikokura imitated me. He squinted his eyes and sighed.

We stopped at every village, and every town. The emperor's letter brought to my feet mayors, governors and generals. Of all I asked: "Have you seen Salome?" Not knowing whom I meant, and guilty perhaps of some secret misdeeds, they would stammer: "No, no, our lord, we have not heard of Salome." But when I explained who Salome was, their lips would stretch slowly into a long smile. "Perhaps our poets or our philosophers can inform our lord. We are so ignorant."

Some of the poets had heard vaguely of a beautiful woman, wandering about the great Celestial Empire, who once in a century upon a certain day and at a certain hour, shared the couch of the Son of Heaven. The philosophers, however, smiled at their simplicity. Salome, they claimed, was another name for the moon, revealing the fullness of her beauty to the emperor, once a month, in his garden.

The philologists ridiculed the philosophers, considering their explanation as childish as that of the poets. Salome, they argued, was a tortoise. The tortoise lived for hundreds of years, and moved about so slowly that it needed

a century to return to the spot whence it started. Among the ancients, they said, the sight of a tortoise was considered a happy omen. Salome was merely a corruption of an obsolete word for tortoise. The two words were derived from the same root in one of the two hundred forgotten dialects of the Celestial Realm.

We reached the town which had seen our arrival years previously.

The gates of Cathay opened and closed behind us, the watchmen hiding their faces in the dust.

A crowd gathered about the two players, who, sitting on small carpets, their legs underneath them, were twisting their long beards, meditating. Some of the spectators whispered to one another, pointing with their fingers to a board. Chess had recently been invented by one of the prisoners of the shah, and Ispahan, the capital, had forgotten about her storytellers and jugglers and mummers in her enthusiasm for the new game. The narrow roads were blocked by players and watchers, and mule and elephant drivers complained in vain to the city authorities for relief.

"Make way! Make way!" a dark-skinned driver shouted. "Make way for my mistress!"

I looked up. Upon a tall elephant, royally caparisoned, reclined a woman. Her eyes were half closed, as if in meditation or in voluptuous revery. Her forehead was encircled by a gold band studded with jewels, and her cheeks were partially hidden by heavy tresses of red hair. I could not tell her age. I remembered To Fo's remark: *As old as the Black Mountain and as young as the first ray of dawn.*

"Make way!"

"Take another road, fool!" several exclaimed.

I approached the driver and placed a coin in his half-closed palm. "Who is your mistress?"

"Princess Salome."

I slipped another coin into his hand. "Where does she live?"

"Yonder. This side of the palm trees."

"Checkmate!" one of the players called out. The crowd dispersed, and Princess Salome, still dreaming or thinking, rode slowly past me, rocking lightly on her giant animal.

Kotikokura beat a monotonous tune upon a kettle, like the white-haired man of his native tribe.

"You, too, Kotikokura? Must man revert forever to his pristine lusts? Stop! We have no time to lose. Go, hire the finest animal. This very evening we shall be the guests of Princess Salome!"

The eunuch watching the gate was a colossal mass of flesh, motionless as a stone. I placed a purse into his hand. "Tell your mistress, Princess Salome, that His Highness Prince Cartaphilus begs for the favor of an audience with her." He took the money, but did not budge.

I waved before his eyes the letter with the seal of the Imperial Dragon. He looked at the curious characters on the parchment, which of course he could not decipher.

I whispered, "A message from the shah." He dropped upon his knees, like a lifeless thing. "Rise," I commanded, "and announce my arrival!"

The palace was surrounded by a garden, in the center of which a tall fountain rose and fell silently, like a stream of light. A flock of peacocks first screeched at our approach, then spread slowly like magnificent fans their luxurious tails.

Salome was reclining upon a low sofa, covered with a silk canopy, embroidered with one enormous eagle, whose wings of red gold seemed to flap in the glitter. I kissed her hand. She bade me sit opposite her.

"I am Cartaphilus, gracious Princess."

"Do not speak in Hebrew, I pray you, Cartaphilus. I hate words that gurgle in the throat. Speak in Greek. Greek undulates like a river stirred by the breezes."

She understood Hebrew—that was what I wished to know, to ascertain if she were indeed Salome.

She patted gently the spotted back of a leopard cub asleep at her side. We were silent. Was she really the princess who once upon a time praised the subtle and impersonal love of flowers, but accepted the personal embrace of a swarthy Nubian? Was she the reincarnation of the most delightful and most detestable princess, or a composite of the women I had known? She partook of each; but was different nevertheless. Was she Salome, Princess of Judea, the perfect woman? Was she all things, being still herself?

She guessed my thoughts. "The body is a house wherein dwells a multitude of beings," she remarked.

I did not know how to begin the conversation, and Salome refused to help me. We remained silent again for some time. The cub opened its eyes, yawned, and licked the hand of his mistress.

Salome placed the tips of her fingers between his jaws.

"Even the wild beasts adore your beauty."

She lifted slightly her left brow, as Poppaea had been in the habit of doing, when disdainful.

"In my travels, O Princess, I have mastered the secret laws of love."

She smiled.

"I have been as a bee that gathers the perfume from a thousand flowers, that its honey may taste the sweeter."

She clapped her hands. A young slave appeared. She whispered something into his ear.

"Does Cartaphilus enjoy music and dancing?"

"Of course, Princess." I was piqued at the idea of being interrupted.

What I had taken for marble walls, dissolved and vanished, and the room in which we were became as large as a street. The ceiling was studded with enormous diamonds, which shed a light, soothing and cool as the sun at dawn, when the lower part of its circumference still touches the thin blue line of the mountains.

In the farther corner of the room, several girls were playing Oriental melodies, which were the passionate pulsation of a lover's blood. Suddenly, strident and insistent, the music changed into a raging sea beating against metal shores.

Naked giants, red-bearded and black, dashed into the room. Their dance mimicked love's final siege. Was it an amorous embrace? Was it wrestling? Their limbs united, separated and clenched again, until one half lay panting, outstretched under the colossal weight of their conquerors.

The princess watched the play of their enormous sinews with half-closed eyes.

The bearded giants were followed by clean-shaven men —black, white and yellow, dancing native dances to which they added movements reminding me of the convulsive spasms with which the body responded to the caresses devised by Flower-of-the-Evening.

These were followed by youths with fleshy hips, whose hair fell over their shoulders in long silken ringlets. Their

dancing was almost motionless, like half-congealed waters or wary snakes that creep among the grasses more silently than summer breezes.

The princess threw a bracelet to one of the dancers. He walked over to her with tiny, mincing steps, balancing his hips like a young Hindu girl, who carries upon her head a crystal vase filled with perfume. Salome caressed him, and bade him sit at her feet. His head against her knee, he remained motionless in an attitude of adoration.

The music played softly a Lesbian air, stirring epicene dreams and shadowy atavistic desires. Girls entered, some tall, slim, with wiry muscles; others, with full-blossomed breasts, wearing like a badge of love the triangle of Astarte. They formed a semicircle, in the center of which a tall woman, her body half hidden by many veils of various hues, began to dance, first slowly like the young men, but gradually quickening her movements until she seemed like a wind of many colors.

Salome bade her approach, placed around her neck a gold chain, and embraced her.

The girls sang to the accompaniment of a harp. Slaves shook perfumes out of ivory bowls the shape of roses.

Salome waved her hand. It was as if some divinity had commanded a storm. The bearded men fell upon the women with groans of anguish and delight, like wild beasts mating. The women, like maenads, encircled the youths and embraced each other. Bearded giants, full-breasted women, girls indistinguishable from boys, boys hardly distinguishable from maids, curious figures in the chasm between the sexes, all danced to a music that was like a madman's joy. It was a feast of Priapus, an orgy of sex in which sex overflowed its limits and blood mingled with kisses. It was a battle of lust punctured by the crash of cymbals and the swish of lashes.

The music died slowly; the dancers, exhausted, dropped to the floor in heaps of two, three or four; the lights dimmed until one could distinguish merely motion, like some ocean tossed by winds blowing in many directions. . . .

Salome clapped her hands. The walls moved back into their original position. The lights shone once more. The storm abated. One heard nothing save the loud yawning of the cub.

Salome brushed aside one of her braids, and looked at me, smiling. I understood what she meant.

"You wish to convey to me by this exhibition that you too have explored the ways and the byways of pleasure," I said.

"I too," she said, "have discovered unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged. I have traversed the two hundred and sixty ways of love, the thirteen secret ways that are known only to the emperor, and the seven ways that are not known even to the emperor himself. I seek something beyond the ultimate portal of pleasure . . ."

"Is this orgasmic medley your definition of love, Princess?" I queried.

"Love, Cartaphilus, what is love?"

The silk curtain stirred a little, and the long, hairy arm of Kotikokura moved slowly in, followed by his head.

"Who is that?" Salome asked.

"My slave, Your Highness. His fidelity is so great that he fears to leave me alone."

Kotikokura withdrew.

"Is he a man . . . or a beast?" She sat up, wrinkled her brow a little, as Damis used to do, when very much interested. "Who is he, Cartaphilus?"

"A denizen of the forest, Princess. I found him in Africa."

"In Africa?"

"A curious country . . . peopled with extraordinary beings."

"What is his name?"

"Kotikokura."

"Kotikokura. . . ." The name seemed to float like music from her throat.

"It means The Accursed One."

"The accursed?"

"He dared to laugh at the gods. . . ."

She looked at me, fathoming my thoughts.

"It is not difficult to become a god, Cartaphilus. . . ."

Again her eyes traveled to the curtain where the eyes of Kotikokura gleamed.

"Cartaphilus, will you sell me your slave?"

"He is not really my slave. He is my friend, who has saved my life on several occasions."

"Your life, Cartaphilus?" There was a touch of irony in her intonation.

"Not my life, then, my skin. . . ."

She remained silent for a while. "I will give you in exchange three of my slaves, a maid, a boy and if you wish, my favorite hermaphrodite . . ."

"I cannot barter my friend for your slaves."

"Take six of them . . . twelve, Cartaphilus. They are marvelous people, past masters and past mistresses in the art of pleasure . . . and pain."

I made no answer.

"Well?"

"Kotikokura!" I called.

He appeared immediately. I made a sign. He returned with a casket of jade, and walked out again. Salome watched him with a curious fascination.

"Princess, deign to accept this." I opened the casket, which was filled with exquisite trinkets of jade and ivory. I recounted their history and their symbolism. I spoke of the great artists who had imprinted them with their dreams. Salome, paying no attention to my explanation, toyed with the tiny figure of Li-Bi-Do, an obscene god, long forgotten, even in the Celestial Realm, and carelessly tossed the others aside.

"Kotikokura has an extraordinary head . . . and what [illegible]!"

Did she need a headless lover to excite her emotions?

"A strange head," she mused.

Was it her intention to decapitate Kotikokura?

Should I offer his head for her love?

"Let me have Kotikokura, Cartaphilus."

I remained pensive.

"Does Cartaphilus believe that Salome desires to repeat the same sensation forever?" she remarked, again reading my thoughts.

"Kotikokura shall remain with Princess Salome, if she commands, for one night," I said angrily.

"What will you take in exchange?"

"Cartaphilus does not bargain."

18. SALOME WRITES A LETTER—MAGIC RUINS—THE TOKEN

At dawn Kotikokura appeared, bringing me a letter. It was in Hebrew, on thin parchment:

"What Cartaphilus seeks Salome must also seek. In strange things and strange places she seeks her soul. Farewell!"

I looked intently at Kotikokura. He lowered his eyes, and bent nearly in two. I raised my fist to strike him. Cartaphilus, I thought, are you jealous . . . jealous of an ape? I laughed, opened my fist and caressed his head. "It is well, my friend. Salome preferred Kotikokura, as she once preferred . . . but no matter. . . ."

I asked him many things. He merely grinned or grumbled. Nevertheless, my desire to possess Salome did not abate. She must pay for her pleasure! My generosity had been merely a gesture.

"Salome shall be mine! We go there again this evening, Kotikokura. Am I not Ca-ta-pha?"

Kotikokura knelt. "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!"

The gate stood wide opened and unwatched. No sword, no eunuch. Two owls, perching upon it, hooted at our approach, and rocked it by merely flapping their wings. What the previous night had been a gorgeous garden was now a wilderness of giant weeds, which scratched our hands and faces as we tried to make a pathway to the house. I looked in vain for the peacocks, and Kotikokura

watched the palm trees, whose withered leaves were covered with a heavy white dust, to discover the monkeys. Only large bats brushed threateningly against our faces.

The steps leading to the palace, shook under our feet, and the door, hanging from one hinge, swung against us like a broken branch. We lit a torch. Rats, enormous worms and lizards, scurried into the large holes of floors and walls, or remained in the corners in menacing attitudes. Our faces became entangled in the cobwebs which hung from the ceilings where diamonds had been glittering like lamps.

The couch Salome had sat upon crumbled at my touch; the rest of the furniture was an indescribable hill of debris, except one huge bed which seemed intact. We approached it. Pathetically, like a living thing in a vast cemetery, shone upon it Li-Bi-Do, the exquisite tiny god of jade I had given Salome.

"It was not a dream, Kotikokura!"

As we reached the spot where the fountain had been, I noticed a large stone basin, made white by the moon. I looked into it. A large tortoise, whose back glittered like a great yellow and black jewel, lay within it, motionless save for a tiny, sharp head which moved rapidly like the tongue of a bell.

"A tortoise, Kotikokura! Is this Salome? Was the Chinese philologist right? Was it this animal with whom you spent the night?"

Kotikokura grinned.

"We shall take it with us. Its name shall be Salome, in honor of the magnificent princess."

I inquired about Salome of many people. No one had ever heard of her. The castle had been in ruins for generations. It was a place haunted by evil spirits and queer beasts, but as I insisted that I had seen and spoken to a beautiful princess there, whose retinue was enormous and magnificent, that peacocks spread their gorgeous fans at our approach, and monkeys hung on the branches of palm trees, the people smiled or laughed, and as I turned my face, pointed to their foreheads significantly.

For a long time, I could think of nothing save Salome. I was quite certain that I had actually met her and that, much better versed in magic than I, she had been able to

transform ruins and death into life and magnificence for a night. But why had she treated me so disdainfully, preferring an ape's caresses to mine? Was I he whom she must shun?

Perhaps—and this pleased me and comforted me more than any other idea—she feared that if she yielded herself to me, her personality, weaker than mine, would be submerged and conquered.

Perhaps possession would slay desire.

No! Seeking was better than finding . . .

I laughed aloud. Kotikokura, frightened, crouched behind me.

19. I REACH THE OUTSKIRTS OF MECCA—THE ANGEL GABRIEL DICTATES A BOOK—MOHAMMED STROKES HIS BEARD—MECCA GLOWS LIKE A RUBY—THE PROPHET CONQUERS

RUMORS of the new prophet had reached me from many quarters. These rumors strangely disturbed me. Could it be Jesus returned to earth? Was it the second coming of the Messiah which John and Mary ceaselessly prophesied?

"Tarry until I come," he had said. If the second part of his command should prove as true as the first, my pilgrimage was at an end. I was not prepared for such an issue. Every year had added new zest to my life. I did not want to relinquish it now. Nevertheless, some force beyond my own volition drew me to Mecca.

Soft couches, delicious fruits and beautiful virgins? It could hardly be that the paradise of Jesus was so earthly. It was possible, even probable, that the horseshoer had misinterpreted his words. Even Paul and Peter and his immediate disciples had misunderstood him. I tried to visualize Jesus, to hear his voice. I could recall nothing save his luminous eyes, which I preferred not to remember. . . .

We reached the outskirts of Mecca, and it began to rain—a heavy, perpendicular rain. We struck up our tents.

Kotikokura was snoring. The tortoise stretched out its thin head at intervals and munched the large leaf of cabbage in front of it. The rain beat upon the canvas.

Should I turn back? Could I avoid my destiny? Was I master of myself? Why should I fear? Was it not ridiculous to think that Jesus had returned? And yet—was it more impossible than the miracle of my own existence?

Suddenly I remembered Nero; I could see him arranging the folds of his toga. He was dust. I remembered John and Magdalen, Lydia, Damis, Ulrica, Flower-of-the-Evening. All were dust; should I become dust as well? I shuddered. No! I must live on! I had permitted life to pass me by as a dream. From now on I would grasp at realities! I would begin to live!

Mecca was a cauldron of argumentation and mysterious stabbings. The camps had not yet been clearly formed, and it was dangerous to say "I believe" or "I doubt." Believers and doubters alike had their faces set, and their hands upon the handles of the semicircular knives which protruded out of their wide belts.

"Neither nod nor shake your head, Kotikokura. We are strangers from far-off countries passing through Arabia. We have not heard of Mohammed, the new Prophet, but are certain that truth will conquer."

But if my lips were tightly sealed, my ears were opened wide and attuned to the whisperings, as well as to the tumult of the storm.

Was Jesus Mohammed? Was Mohammed Jesus? I must face my destiny. The uncertainty was intolerable. But where was Mohammed? Neither the believers nor his enemies could tell with precision. The former promised that he would soon appear, a dazzling prince at the head of a great army, leading them to victory; the latter laughed ironically, and called him a coward, hiding behind the skirts of his women, afraid to face them. . . .

Meanwhile, the name of Abu-Bekr crawled into the argumentations, subtly, quietly, with something of an ominous significance. No one knew how powerful or how weak Mohammed's father-in-law might be; no one could tell when or how he had acquired his wealth, nor what had prompted him years ago to give his daughter into marriage to an almost destitute stripling. And now that his daughter was dead, and Mohammed remarried for the third time—what were the relations between the two? They could neither praise nor condemn Abu-Bekr. He eluded them like water.

I sought out Abu-Bekr. I won his confidence by quoting ancient prophecies announcing the coming of the Messiah. I offered him my wealth for his camels. The old man was moved. We became blood brothers. Abu-Bekr consented to lead me to the hiding place of Mohammed.

"Follow me, Cartaphilus."

Abu-Bekr led the way through a subterranean passage which meandered in various directions. At every turn, a watchman demanded the password. Abu-Bekr answered each one differently, and each one replied: "Allah is God, and Mohammed is His Prophet."

We climbed several steps and entered the room to our right. A middle-aged man was reclining on a couch. A pretty girl, one of his wives or concubines, was anointing his head and washing his beard with perfume.

"Mohammed, my son, and Prophet of Allah, I have brought a stranger with me—Cartaphilus, a great merchant of India." I used the Latin form of my name by preference.

Mohammed motioned to the girl, who walked out immediately. I felt a curious dizziness. Was it merely my own excitement, or the presence of him whose return would mean my destruction, as long ago it had meant my life?

Mohammed raised his eyes. They were very black and dazzling. But they were not the eyes of the Nazarene!

"Welcome, Cartaphilus."

His voice was deep and vibrant, but it was not the voice of Jesus! My faintness disappeared. He bade us sit down, and ordered sweets for us.

"Has the Angel of Allah visited you today, my son?"

"He has."

"Is it permissible for our ears, Prophet of Allah, to hear the angelic message?"

Mohammed looked at me critically.

"Our sacred books," I said, "foretell the advent of the true Prophet, who was born in the desert. They were dictated by God himself."

"I know. So were the words that Moses carved on the tablets of stone. Jesus, too, heard God."

"Moses," I remarked, "was a great lawgiver. Jesus was a young prophet who had heard merely the beginning of the prophecy and mistook its purpose."

Mohammed caressed his beard. His hand was large and

fleshy. It was not the hand of Jesus. No, he was not Jesus, or if Jesus, so changed that he remembered neither himself nor me.

"Prophet of Allah," I said, "is it true that Europe is nearly all Christian?"

"It is, Cartaphilus."

"The boundaries between Europe and Asia are no longer very formidable. I have heard that even the great wall that encircles the Celestial Empire yields to the hoofs of horses and camels."

"They who wait to be attacked are already half conquered," added Abu-Bekr.

"If Christianity has conquered Europe and converted the descendants of Attila—"

"May his name be cursed!" exclaimed Abu-Bekr.

"Then," I continued, "is Arabia safe?"

Mohammed listened intently, smoothening his black beard. His large chest rose and sank quickly.

"Christianity is the religion of woman, Prophet of Allah . . . woman glorified and forgiven."

"Woman is the servant of man!" Mohammed exclaimed.

"Christianity belittles man. It condemns the sword. It sanctifies the eunuch!"

"What!" Mohammed stood up. Only then did I realize how tall and masculine he was, as compared to the Nazarene. He waved his clenched fist. "Christianity shall never pollute the East!"

"The East, then, shall continue to feel the joy of the senses. The East shall continue to sing of the lips and breasts of women; of the prowess of men in battle. The East shall exclaim forever 'Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet!' "

Mohammed, his eyes burning with a curious mixture of passion and dream, stood gazing into the distance. Was he wrestling with himself to overcome the final doubt? Did he see beyond the walls of the room, his followers, lovers of the sword and lovers of woman, in endless phalanxes, march against the West, conquering the Nazarene—the soft preacher of mercy and self-denial?

Closing his eyes, he spoke: "The sincere servants of God shall have a certain provision in paradise . . . they shall be honored; they shall be placed in gardens of pleasure, leaning on couches opposite one another; a cup shall be carried around unto them filled from a limpid

fountain, for the delight of those who drink. Near them shall lie the virgins of paradise, refraining their looks from beholding any besides their spouses, having large black eyes, and resembling the eggs of an ostrich covered with feathers."

He breathed rapidly, and tottered. We grasped him in our arms, and stretched him gently upon the couch. Two spots of foam dotted the corners of his mouth and whitened his beard.

His breathing became gradually regular again. He opened his eyes. "Thus speaks Allah—may his name be praised through Mohammed, his Prophet."

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet," we answered.

Mohammed stood up again and exclaimed: "Every spot of the earth that believes not in Allah and Mohammed shall from now on be *darul harb*—a place of endless conflict!"

Mohammed turned toward the East and knelt. We did likewise.

"Thy will be done, Allah, God of the world."

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet."

"Oh, that I had a daughter who might find favor in your eyes, Cartaphilus!" exclaimed Abu-Bekr, as I crossed the threshold. "Alas! My two remaining daughters are aged, and already married."

"Cartaphilus considers you as a father, nevertheless, Abu-Bekr. I was drawn to your country, as the water of the rain is drawn by the thirsty earth. The country of my fathers has been destroyed and my people dispersed by those who profess the weak and effeminate religion of the Nazarene. Abu-Bekr and the Prophet shall avenge us!"

He stood up in his turn. "They shall avenge you, Cartaphilus, I swear it by Allah, and the beard of the Prophet!"

We reseated ourselves.

"Mohammed is wiser than all men, and nearer to Allah, —but for that reason, a visionary."

"Very true. Had it not been for me, he would have gone into the desert to speak with the angels, while our enemies slaughtered his followers."

"It is for us, then, to attend to all practical affairs."

"Yes, Cartaphilus." He raised my hands to his lips.

"Allah has sent His angel Gabriel to His Prophet, that he may tell him the truth, and his other angel Cartaphilus, that the truth may be heard by all men."

Mohammed's camp seemed deserted. Many of the believers were sent about the town, instructed to look dejected and humble. Our enemies jeered at them, shouting: "Where is your prophet, fool? Has he spoken to the angel again? What did the angel say to him?" Frequently they slapped their faces, or spat upon them. The believers, more Christian than the followers of the Nazarene, bent their backs and grumbled, "Mercy, masters."

Meanwhile, Abu-Bekr and ten chiefs planned the attack. I moved into a secluded house on the outskirts of the city, where I received daily reports. From time to time, Abu Bekr came to consult me. I suggested some of the methods used by the Romans, and illustrated them by means of chess.

Abu-Bekr presented me with two virgins, that time might not weigh too heavily upon me.

"Woman is after all the best toy that Allah has invented, provided she is obedient and faithful," he said. . . .

Abu-Bekr decided to attack the enemy at night, as I had advised. Thanks to my gold, his men were all well equipped and the granaries filled to the brim. The people, considering themselves quite secure henceforth, slept peacefully. We stood upon the top of one of the hills. A crescent moon, sharp and dazzling as a scimitar, and a star like a diamond upon the hilt, hung above us.

"Day shall break much sooner than usual, Cartaphilus. Allah will shorten this night for the sake of His Prophet, Mohammed."

Masses of flames began to appear at many angles of the city. The black window of night cracked, as if large rocks had been hurled against it.

"Allah be praised, and His Prophet live forever!" Abu-Bekr exclaimed, and looking at the moon, began to intone an ancient Arabic war song:

We are the children of Allah.
When our spears grow rusty
We make them bright
With the blood of our enemies.

I thought, Is he Nero? Am I witnessing once again the burning of Rome?

The officers sang the last words of each verse. I hummed. Mecca glowed like an enormous ruby in a dark hall. The singing mingled with the wails and lamentations of men and women.

"Allah is the only God, and Mohammed is His Prophet!"

For two days, messengers dropped at our feet, and when their voices became articulate, exclaimed: "Allah be praised! Our enemies wallow in their blood like slaughtered oxen! Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet!"

Upon a tall, white steed Mohammed, dressed in a cloak of white silk and a turban shining with jewels, rode slowly through the city. In front of him, a hundred priests chanted, and exclaimed from time to time: "Allah is the only God, and Mohammed is His Prophet." Behind him, Abu-Bekr, the staff of officers and I, rode on small black horses, and for a few miles in our rear, men, women and children walked or rode, singing martial airs and screaming from time to time, at the top of their vioces: "Allah is the only God, and Mohammed is His Prophet."

"This was the ambition of Jesus—to ride triumphantly amid believers proclaiming him the king of the Jews. But instead, he dragged his cross, hooted and mocked by the populace—for it was ordered by Allah that only his true Prophet should be victorious."

"Allah is just and His mercy is eternal," answered Mohammed. He turned and looked at me, his eyes dazzling. "I must go, Cartaphilus, but thou wilt tarry . . ."

I was startled. Was my destiny reiterated and reinforced? Was this the echo of the anathema, softened into a blessing?

As a hurricane that uproots mighty oaks, crumbles houses, and whirls in the air huge animals like withered leaves or feathers dropped from sparrows' backs, were the fury and the might of the Prophet's army.

The word always succeeded the sword, and the conquered were either persuaded of the truth, or considered it more prudent and more profitable to pretend belief. Thus all Arabia shouted: "Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet." The desert and the mountains trembled with the echo.

20. CATASTROPHE—I WORK A MIRACLE—I RAISE A COFFIN—ABU-BEKR PAYS HIS DEBT

Abu-Bekr entered, breathless, his beard disheveled and his hands trembling. "Cartaphilus, the Prophet is dead!"

"The Prophet cannot die, Abu-Bekr."

"Alas," he whispered into my ear, "he was poisoned."

"Has the news spread among the believers?"

"Not yet. At this very moment, millions are praying to the Prophet—but the Prophet is no more!"

Abu-Bekr seated himself upon the floor, his head between his hands. "The Prophet is no more! The Prophet is no more," he groaned.

"A Prophet must die that he may live forever. He who lives too long dies in truth."

"Cartaphilus, you have brought truth to the Prophet; bring truth to his followers."

"Abu-Bekr, return and announce to all that the Prophet has died."

Abu-Bekr looked at me, dismayed. "Shall we survive when he is no longer?"

I continued, without answering his remark: ". . . but that tonight he shall be resurrected, and the Archangel Gabriel shall carry him to paradise in his arms."

Abu-Bekr remained silent.

"The Prophet shall rise to Heaven, Abu-Bekr, do not fear—and you shall be his voice on earth."

"But can it really be done?"

"Who shall fathom life's mysterious forces, Abu-Bekr? Who shall understand Allah's will?"

Abu-Bekr nodded thoughtfully.

"Go then, Abu-Bekr—announce the death and the resurrection of the Prophet, and order all believers to come at sunset to the Mountain of Light."

"It shall be done as you say."

"Then—return to me, unseen by the rest."

"I shall return . . . unseen."

The sky was heavy with clouds, and a storm seemed imminent. No more propitious moment could have been desired. The people, awed by the weather, attributed their emotion entirely to the great event which was about to take place. The old men remembered that on the day of the Prophet's birth, the heavens were just as black, and a terrible storm followed—but only the wicked were hurt, and their houses demolished. The good remained unscathed.

"Let the unbelievers purify their hearts now, and repent!" exclaimed, at intervals, the priests. "God shall have mercy only upon those who believe. So says the Prophet."

Thousands sang, wept, or called to Allah to witness the anguish of their souls. Abu-Bekr, Kotikokura and I were hidden by a rock which had the shape of a great bowl, halfway overtipped. The body of Mohammed, dressed in a white silk robe, his face dazzling, lay outstretched in the open coffin at our feet.

Suddenly the clouds were rent as if by a long white whip. "Now, Abu-Bekr!" I whispered.

"The Prophet lives forever!" he exclaimed.

The priests burst into a wild chant. The people shouted: "The Prophet lives forever!"

The coffin began to rise out of the enclosure, overtopped the rock and remained in mid-air. A gasp, as if a colossal smothered abyss suddenly flooded with air,—and then a shout that stifled the thunderclap.

"The Prophet ascends to Allah!"

"The angels are lifting him up!"

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet!"

"He is rising! He is rising!"

"He lives forever!"

The lightning flashed in quick succession. The thunderclaps beat against the mountain like Herculean hammers.

The people fell upon their faces, weeping, groaning, singing.

Still hidden by the rock, Abu-Bekr called out: "Hearken, all!"

"He speaks! He speaks! The Prophet speaks!"

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet!" Abu-Bekr chanted. "That you may never forget, I bequeath unto you the Kaaba upon which I have placed the crescent moon, taken from heaven for a night. It is my gift to the faithful ones, that they may never forget."

"We shall never forget!"

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet." From the peak of the hills, the voice continued: "Return now, children of Allah. Let not your eyes gaze again upon the Mountain of Light, until the morning, lest you be stricken blind."

The priests sang:

We are the children of Allah.
When our spears grow rusty
We make them bright
With the blood of our enemies.

The people repeated the refrain. Their voices mingled with the thunderclaps.

The coffin with the body of the Prophet descended slowly as if held by a rope. We carried it to a ditch which we had dug previously, and buried it, covering the grave with a rock. Suddenly, the clouds began to disperse, as if some overindustrious divinity had swept them into a corner. We mounted our horses.

"Behold I too can work miracles, Jesus of Nazareth!" I exclaimed. "Your name and your followers shall be as dust underneath the hoofs of Mohammed's horses."

"Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His Prophet!" Abu-Bekr shouted.

The resurrection of Mohammed gave his religion a new spiritual significance and united the followers as if a gigantic hand, stretching from the Red Sea to the outer rim of the desert, closed into a firm fist. There was no doubt that Mohammedanism—as the new sect was beginning to be called—would prosper luxuriantly as a young and powerful tree.

My work was accomplished. The crescent would overtop the cross, I was certain of it. Meanwhile, I could abide patiently my time, catching once more the thread of my soul, entangled among the recent events.

I decided to leave. Abu-Bekr did not persuade me to remain. He had begun to think of me in terms of the superhuman, and accepted my word as irrevocable. Perhaps, too, he feared me. Could I not, if I wished, claim to be Mohammed returned to life, or his appointed successor?

21. EVIL OMENS — SHIPWRECKED — SOFT HANDS—"WHERE IS KOTIKOKURA?"—ULRICA ONCE MORE—A HUSBAND WADES TO SHORE—FAREWELL

The Caliph's armies captured Alexandria and the northern part of Africa, as far as the Atlantic Ocean. Europe's feet began to scorch under the conflagration. Before long, the flames would rise and consume the entire body. Why was I so delighted? Was Mohammedanism more desirable than Christianity? Was it less an amalgamation of superstitions? Neither Christ nor Mohammed tolerated reason, and I would be an outcast whether the golden cross or the silver crescent glittered. And yet I exulted in the idea that the Nazarene must succumb to Mohammed.

I decided to investigate the progress of Christianity. Once more I was a wanderer. Once more the sea carried me away in her arms to a new destiny. The waves beat against the sides of our boat drearily, as a dog asleep wards off with his tired paw a pestiferous fly.

The moon hid her ghastly face behind a fan of clouds. The azure waters of the Mediterranean changed to a dark, ominous blue which at times appeared jet black. The waves which had ruffled gracefully, like silk, became gigantic hills dashing angrily against our boat. Food became scarce. Several members of the crew died from some mysterious malady.

To the east of us, the clouds gathered like a gigantic black fist. The sailors, grumbling and taciturn, rushed up and down the deck.

Three more sailors died and were thrown into the ocean. The crew made the sign of the cross whenever they passed me or Kotikokura.

"We must act quickly, Kotikokura. It is not pleasant to have a knife thrust through your body."

Kotikokura did not answer, but his fist opened and shut spasmodically.

Next morning the deck was strewn with the corpses of the crew and of the captain. We threw them one by one into the ocean.

Kotikokura had a few cuts on his arm which a sailor not entirely asleep from my potion had managed to inflict. He licked his wounds like an animal. I was struck by the enormous size of his tongue.

At times we drifted. At other times I steered the vessel. Kotikokura scrubbed the deck, his immense muscles pressing against the hairy skin.

Kotikokura was shouting and dancing about me. His eyes, much keener than mine, had espied land. He had become very restless recently, and complained steadily against his work. He considered it a positive pain, and longed for the solid earth where he never overstrained his muscles. It was one thing to please a princess, and another to keep a boat in good condition.

"We are reaching land, and you are overjoyed, Kotikokura. You shall be free."

Kotikokura danced more wildly.

"Yes, my friend, but if you are free of the boat, you will be a slave to the earth. You will have to act in accordance with the foolish customs and notions of whatever country we may happen to live in. Who knows which is worse slavery? Perhaps it were best to continue forever on the water, where we do not have to pretend any religion, or nationality. For such people as we—"

Kotikokura shouted: "No! No! No!"

"All right. It shall be as you say. But where shall we land? And what shall we be? It is never sufficient to be a man, Kotikokura. It is not even essential. It is absolutely necessary, however, that we praise the right Prophet and shout 'Long live!' to the right Emperor."

Kotikokura was not in the mood for listening to me.

"Land! Land!" he exclaimed, pointing to the west. By this time, I had begun to see the gray peaks of a long stretch of rocks or mountains.

"Why should we trouble our minds about our welfare, my friend? The gods who are anxious to keep us alive as symbols of perversity will see to it that all things are adjusted in our favor. Are we not their perennial prisoners; and their eyes—are they not a million times sharper than ours?"

The sky darkened with heavy clouds, and the wind beat against our masts like iron whips.

"Kotikokura, have we blasphemed the gods, or overestimated our importance?"

He looked worried. I patted his head.

The storm became more and more violent. The waves dashed against our boat, as if intent upon crushing it. We were approaching rocks. If the storm did not abate, or the wind change direction, the boat would be dashed to bits.

"Kotikokura, we must be ready for anything. Tie about you this belt, within which are hidden many precious stones. I shall do likewise with this belt. If we are shipwrecked, and survive, our jewels will buy us a cheerful welcome."

The storm continued its mad career. All my efforts to save the boat were fruitless.

"In a few moments, Kotikokura, we shall have to battle against the waves. If this is to be the end, let it be."

Kotikokura wept. "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!"

I embraced him. Then we leaped into the angry sea to escape the wreckage of our ship. We struggled with the ocean, bruising alike our dignity and our skin.

"Don't give up, Kotikokura!" I shouted from time to time.

"Ca-ta-pha!" he replied.

"Keep your head up, Kotikokura."

"Ca-ta-pha."

At times, very near each other, at times barely within hearing distance, we battled against the waves that showed no mercy.

"Kotikokura," I whispered. "Kotikokura."

Was it merely my own imagination, or did I hear him answer: "Ca-ta-pha. Ca-ta-pha."

"Ko-ti-ko—"

The waters were quiet and still like a bed of feathers.

A soft hand caressed my forehead.

I looked up. I saw a young woman, with long braids the color of flax, and light blue eyes.

"Ulrica!" I whispered.

"I am Ulrica. How did you know my name?"

"Ulrica!" I whispered again, and closed my eyes. I tried to understand where I was, and how I happened to have got there. Slowly, painfully, I reconstructed my boat, the storm, the shipwreck. And who was this woman? Who was Ulrica? Oh, yes . . . my beloved . . . long, long ago . . . on the Rhine . . . my vineyards.

But what was she doing here? and Kotikokura . . . where was he? What had happened to him? I opened my eyes. The young woman was sitting near my bed, holding a cup out of which rose a thin vapor, delicately scented.

"Drink."

I drank, breathed deeply, and stood up.

"Where is Kotikokura?"

"Who is Kotikokura?"

"My friend . . . my brother."

She patted my hand, and said very softly: "Everything will be all right, you will see. Don't exert yourself too much."

"Don't be afraid, Ulrica. I am already well. Kotikokura is not a creature of my imagination. He is a real person. I understand everything now. I was shipwrecked, was I not?"

"Yes."

"Well, Kotikokura was with me. We swam for a long while, and suddenly as I was about to lose consciousness, I felt someone or something lift me out of the water. I was saved! But life will be worth very little if my dear friend was drowned."

"Perhaps he was saved also. When you get well enough to walk about, we shall look for him. . . ."

I inquired everywhere for Kotikokura. No one seemed to have seen another sailor who was saved on the day of the great storm. If I remained alive, could he drown? Were we not of the same blood? Was not my fate his? Was he perhaps at the bottom of the ocean, in constant agony, yet unable to die? Was he a prisoner of the mon-

sters of the sea? If Kotikokura was not drowned, he was somewhere among men, and I was happy to think that I had given him enough precious stones to make him wealthy for centuries.

Ulrica and I were sitting on the veranda looking at the sea.

"I must have given you much trouble."

"No, Cartaphilus."

"You are kinder to me than a mother."

"Is not woman always the mother?"

"I have traveled all over the world, Ulrica, and have read the books of many nations, while you have been here your entire life watching the sea and helping people in distress. And yet, we have reached the same conclusion. Is it not strange?"

"Why should it be strange, Cartaphilus? What can one see in other lands but the earth, the water, the sky, and men and women? And is not God everywhere—and do not all people worship Jesus?"

"All people, Ulrica?"

"All except the Moors. But our king will convert them or kill them. My husband, who was a sailor like yourself and had traveled everywhere, told me how Charles, after conquering all of Europe, was conquered himself by Jesus."

"Your husband is dead, Ulrica?"

She nodded.

We remained silent for a while. The sea splashed the rock lazily, as if playing with it.

"The sea hides a man for years sometimes, and suddenly washes him back to his home. Your husband may return."

She shook her head.

Ulrica's love and tenderness consoled me a little for the loss of Kotikokura. Meanwhile, I gathered information about the political and religious conditions of the country, and planned my new attack. I broached the matter of travel to Ulrica, but like the other Ulrica, she obstinately refused to leave her place of birth. I was becoming restless.

The desire to leave beat against my brain as an impatient stallion paws the ground. Vaguely the thought of abandoning Ulrica shaped itself in my brain. One evening,

as I was telling Ulrica a story, playing with her hair which she had unfolded upon my knees—someone knocked at the door. Ulrica asked who it was.

"Open, Ulrica—it is I, your husband!"

A man, tall, gaunt and unshaven, appeared on the threshold.

"Ulrica!" he exclaimed, but stopped short on seeing me. "So that's it! Your husband fights the king's wars while you are another man's bedfellow."

"She thought you were dead, sir."

"What of that? A whore's a whore—"

"You misjudge, sir. She is faithful—"

"Faithful?" He laughed, and turned Ulrica about, pulling her by the hair.

"Can you swear by Holy Writ that you are faithful to me?"

She remained silent, her head bent upon her chest.

He raised his fist. "Shameless bitch!" he shouted. "I'll kill you!"

"Don't touch her!" I remarked quietly.

"What? You! You! How dare you step between husband and wife? Yes—that is true; first I must kill you! Then I shall square my account with her! Cur!" he shouted, and drawing a knife from his belt, raised it, ready to strike me.

Ulrica screamed, and trying to divert the blow, received it full in the chest. Without uttering one sound, she fell in a heap.

He bent over her, caressed her face, closed her eyes, arranged her hair. He motioned to me to help him. He held her head, and I her feet. His back turned toward me, he led the way to the rocks. We climbed the highest of them. We swung the body and threw it as far out as we could into the sea. A small jet of water splashed our feet.

I planted myself firmly on the rock, expecting a furious combat. Instead, however, he turned about quickly, descended the rock, and walked off. It was too dark to see the direction he took.

I seated myself on the rock, and meditated on my life. What was it, save a panorama of dreams and of graves? What could it ever be but more dreams and more graves?

It became chilly. I shivered, and rose with a start.

"Ulrica," I muttered, "farewell."

22. CHARLEMAGNE HAS A PAIN IN HIS LEG —INCESTUOUS LOVE—I PREPARE TROUBLE

AACHEN fluttered with pride. Charlemagne had recently returned, crowned Emperor of the West by the grace of God, and possessor of the key to the grave of St. Peter. To show his gratitude to the Pope, he issued an order to behead all subjects who refused to accept baptism. He founded several schools of theology and paid large salaries to teachers of Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

Charles had chosen Aachen because of its warm springs. In spite of his Herculean figure, he suffered from rheumatism. But the springs did not prove as miraculous as he had expected, and a new physician, I knew, would be welcome. Dressed as a monk, but wearing around my neck a large cross studded with precious stones to indicate opulence, I begged admission to the great monarch, claiming to be a doctor of medicine as well as a master of theology, conversant with all languages. The messenger, an officer of the guard, whose large hand I filled with gold, bade me wait at the gate. A little later he reappeared.

"His Majesty will receive you at once."

I was ushered into a large hall, in the center of which, at a long table, Charlemagne and a dozen men, officers and bishops, had evidently just finished eating, and were munching nuts now, and drinking wine.

I knelt. The emperor bade me rise. His voice was sharp and thin, curiously out of harmony with his enormous body and his short heavy neck.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Isacus, Your Majesty. I was born in Rome, a descendant of the early martyrs who were burnt and tortured for their love of Jesus. Several of my ancestors are buried in the catacombs. Early—in childhood, almost —I heard the Lord command me to travel to all parts of the world, and preach His Holy Word. I have been in every country of Europe, Asia and Africa."

Suddenly the emperor's face twitched. His enormous hand gripped his leg. The rest stopped midway in their laughter and drinking, and looked at one another, distressed.

"You are a doctor, Isacus? Can you relieve my atrocious pain?"

"Your Majesty, I have brought with me strange and secret drugs from Samarkand, the country of marvels. With the help of our Lord Jesus I shall relieve your pain."

I massaged the emperor's leg, whispering passages from the Vedas and invoking Jesus and Mary.

Gradually, Charlemagne's face relaxed, and he breathed freely.

I was offered a cup of wine, and we drank the Emperor's health.

"Will the cure be permanent, Isacus?"

"I dare not hope it, sire."

"How long must the treatment continue?"

"It is not possible to say, Your Majesty, but at least a year or two."

"You shall remain with us, Isacus."

His Majesty's rheumatism necessitated frequent massages. He showered me with gifts and praises, and had I been ambitious, he would have included high honors.

"You are a fool, Isacus, not to desire a bishop's mitre."

"I aspire to no higher honors than to serve my sovereign."

The emperor struck me lightly on the back, and bade me accompany him into the garden.

"What is your opinion, Isacus—should the emperor be the head of the Church or should he relegate his spiritual authority to the Pope?"

"It is very difficult to rule a great empire, Your Majesty."

"It is."

"Should the emperor be concerned as well with the souls of men?"

"Perhaps not. But who should be supreme—the Pope or the emperor?"

"Is it not self-evident, great King? The sword is mightier than the cassock."

"You are the only man of the Church who holds this opinion."

"I am not ambitious, Your Majesty."

A young woman whose hair glittered in the sun like gold that's poured from one vessel into another, was walking slowly, bending now and then over a flower.

The emperor whispered: "Is it a sin to love one's own sister, Isacus?"

"It is not a sin, but a duty, sire."

"I mean—as a man loves a woman."

"In Egypt it was considered sacrilege for a royal brother not to marry his sister. Thus the dynasty was kept undefiled."

"Very interesting," the emperor remarked, his eyes following hungrily the slim figure, whose blue silk gown fluttered a little in the breeze, like an enormous leaf.

"The daughters of Adam and Eve, our first parents, were the wives of Cain and Able, their brothers," I added.

"You are learned indeed, Isacus. I had never thought of this before. I always wondered how they had populated the world. But," he added after a while, "would the Pope approve of this—now?"

"The Pope? The emperor can make and unmake popes. Laws, Your Majesty, are for the people, dispensations for kings. If the Pope does not admit this, he must learn the lesson. . . ."

"I shall teach him his place!" Charlemagne shouted, his voice breaking like a thin needle.

This was what I sought—to instill in Charlemagne a desire to dominate the Church, without being part of it. Thus sooner or later the two powers would clash and destroy each other. The proverb about a house divided against itself still held true.

My position at the court was all the more important and influential because of its indeterminate character. I was merely a monk, officially, but in reality, I was His Majesty's physician and chief adviser in scholastic and polit-

ical matters, also frequently in religious controversies. It became very soon apparent that I was impervious to bribes of all kinds. My enemies sent maidens, delicate and voluptuous, to gain my confidence. When the feminine messengers failed, the subtle priests entrusted their mission to ingratiating and complaisant young men. When those seductions proved equally ineffective it was whispered about that I was a eunuch.

My experiments with a balloon inflated by gas proved my undoing. It gave the church a pretext to accuse me of witchcraft, and to rob me of my wealth.

Even the emperor resented the invention which, crossing the borders with impunity, reduced the might of princes to nothing.

Once more I fled.

23. THE LAND WHERE MEN WEAR SKIRTS —MASCULINE REVOLT—SALOME'S SACRILEGE

For a long while I lived among prostitutes and beggars. I experienced stark poverty, even hunger. It was a new, and therefore not unwelcome sensation. I regained wealth, however, by being a saint and dwelling in a tower curing the lame and the blind in the name of the cross.

Two generations passed. Once more I was a rich man. Fortune, like an obedient bitch, comes to him who waits.

All things were relative—time, space, and Cartaphilus. Cartaphilus more than all else. Just now, he was a Greek of Constantinople, a merchant of moderate means and moderate tastes.

Several merchants tried to interest me in their business, promising me great fortunes. One in particular was persistent. He was a very handsome Arab, who had read much and traveled extensively. What he desired to do, if only he could obtain sufficient funds and a partner as clever and as presentable as I, was to open an establishment—very exclusive and elegant, of course—where men and women could find delectation.

"Nothing is as profitable in this world, sir, as sex and religion. A young man like you," he added, "must be very careful how he invests his money."

I smiled. "I am older than you think."

The Arab alternated his remarks about business with pungent aphorisms about life and women.

"The Koran is right. Woman must always be man's slave. He must crack the whip, else—" he laughed. "They say that in Africa there is a nation where men wear skirts. Imagine that! A nation ruled by women, where men are women's slaves, where female chieftains have harems of males!"

"What is the religion of this country?" I asked.

"They worship a parrot."

Just beyond the desert—a woman ruler and a parrot god. Something within me cried out, Salome—Kotikokura!

The Arab pulled me aside and showed me a ring with a small opal. "Anyone who wears this is bound to be lucky, for it was worn by the Prophet's nephew—may he be blessed forever! I shall present it to you for a trifling sum."

He mentioned a price about ten times greater than its actual value. I had learned enough from him to pay for my lesson.

"It fits your finger as if it had been made expressly for you. You are the man of destiny."

"What destiny?" I asked.

He smiled. "Who knows?"

Meanwhile, something much more important occupied my mind. Was it possible to find both Kotikokura and Salome again?

Who but Salome would think of establishing a matriarchy, with a harem of men? Where would Kotikokura go, if not to his native land? Curiosity, vanity, natural instinct, would prompt him to revisit Africa. Also, perhaps, the feeling that I would seek him where I had originally found him.

Was it possible that so much joy awaited me? I turned the ring about my finger. Would it really bring me good luck? Life was illogical. If two bits of wood nailed in opposite directions could work miracles, why not this ring?

I bought camels and hired four experienced drivers who had crossed the desert several times. I bought a young parrot, whom I taught to say "Carr-tarr-pharr . . ." and to perch upon my camel's head.

With the exception of a mild sandstorm, the passage

was uneventful and suited my mood exceedingly. One morning, the drivers pointed ahead of us. "Look, Prince! Smoke! We have reached the end of our journey."

I paid them what we had agreed upon, to which I added valuable gifts. I kept only my camel and the parrot and one day's food and water. The other animals and the rest of the provisions I allowed the men to take back with them.

I waited until sunset, and having painted the sun upon my turban, the moon upon the camel's forehead and dotted the parrot's beak as of yore, I began my ride in the direction of the smoke.

As I approached, I heard the violent beating of an iron kettle and I saw many men run from various directions. I thought it advisable to hide within hearing distance. A large tree served my purpose admirably. The parrot was asleep, and the camel, weary from the travel, did not stir.

A man waved his arms violently, and shouted at the top of his voice. The rest formed a circle about him.

"How long will you endure the tyranny of this terrible queen and her women?"

The language was that of the tribe that once had worshipped me with the exception of a few words, which seemed a corruption of some European tongue.

"Are you such cowards indeed? Are you not men?"

"Yes, yes!" growled the others.

"Can you forget the great history of our country, as our old men tell it to us, from generation to generation? Can you forget that Ca-ta-pha, supreme god of heaven, came himself among us?"

"We shall never forget!"

"Has he not commanded man to rule woman?"

"He has!"

Meanwhile, more men came, some of them carrying long spears, others hatchets. In the reflection of the fire, which was burning a little distance from them, they appeared like animated black shadows of invisible people.

"Have they not tortured us enough? Have they not tickled hundreds to death? Have they not given us refuse to feed upon? If we are defeated, we can at least refuse to be fathers!"

"How can we refuse to beget their children?"

"Her virgins inflame our passion . . ."

"The queen's wines and spices set our blood on fire."

"We formed a sacred band to resist her enchantments. Emasculate yourselves to assert your manhood! Better castrates than slaves!"

"Better castrates than slaves!"

From the distance several men shouted, "Chief! Chief! The queen . . . has driven . . . the High Priest out of the temple. . . . She has broken the altar. . . . She has outraged the Keeper of the Holy Camel. . . . She has opened the cage of the Sacred Bird."

"She shall not live!"

"Heaven will strike her blind!"

"She proclaims herself God!"

"Sacrilege!"

"Ca-ta-pha will destroy us all!"

"Death to the Sorceress."

"The High Priest is coming with the sacred image of Ca-ta-pha!"

"Here he is! Here he is!"

Kotikokura, dressed as a bishop, carrying in his hand an immense golden image of a rider upon a camel, upon whose head perched a open-mouthed parrot, approached pompously, preceded and followed by several priests. All men dropped on their faces, calling out: "Ca-ta-pha!"

I did not know whether to shout for joy or to laugh uproariously. My parrot, awakened by the noise and hearing my name pronounced, screeched: "Carr-tarr-pharr! Carr-tarr-phar. . . ."

There was a deadly silence.

I struck the camel's back with my open palm and the animal, half asleep, trudged slowly toward the people, who, at my approach, began to roar and howl and shout. They beat their faces with their fists, rolled upon the ground, kissed the camel's hoofs.

"Carr-tarr-pharr! Carr-tarr-pharr!"

Kotikokura saw me. "Ca-ta-pha! My master!"

He gave the image to one of the priests, helped me descend from the animal, and embraced me, weeping on my chest. He turned to the men, who, seeing how I treated their High Priest, remained stock-still, their mouths and eyes wide open, their bodies bent.

"Look! Ca-ta-pha! God has come. Ca-ta-pha—god!" Kotikokura exclaimed.

The men howled: "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha! God!"

Weary of their infernal vociferation, I ordered them

to stand aside, silent, while I discussed with their spiritual ruler, what means to take against the terrible queen who violated the customs of the tribe by her refusal to sleep for eight days with the corpse of her chief male concubine, and who desecrated my holy house.

"Kotikokura, how did you disappear? Where have you been, Kotikokura, my friend, my brother?"

Kotikokura growled and chattered inarticulate sounds. He danced about me, embraced me, kissed my hands, kissed the camel's nose. His tiara tilted now to one side, now to the other. A hundred years of civilization had fallen off him like a scab, and he resembled, for the moment, his aboriginal self.

"Who is this queen, Kotikokura?" I asked, my voice trembling a little.

"Salome."

I had expected to hear the word, and yet it almost gave me the vertigo. I grasped Kotikokura's arm to steady myself.

"Salome wants to be god in place of Ca-ta-pha. She must die."

I realized that if I did not act quickly, my enraged people would attack Salome. They must not mar her incomparable perfection!

"Hearken, my people! By the sacred parrot, let no one touch the queen! Ca-ta-pha, your god, will destroy her himself!"

I mounted the camel. Kotikokura preceded me, the rest followed. The women who watched the gate of the city, tall creatures, hipless and breastless, seeing us, threw their spears to the ground. As we proceeded, men and women prostrated themselves before us, shouting my name.

When enough had gathered together, I stopped.

"Hearken, ye women! You have been unkind and unjust to your men. I could no longer endure your ways, and I have come to punish you."

"Ca-ta-pha will punish us!"

I remained silent for a while. "But Ca-ta-pha is a kind God. I shall neither broil you on spits, nor chop your heads off with a hatchet, nor shall I inflict upon you the tortures which you have inflicted upon your men. So long as you obey man, and worship me, you shall not perish; neither shall you suffer."

"Ca-ta-pha is a merciful god."

"As for your queen, touch not one hair of her head, but leave her to the wrath and vengeance of Ca-ta-pha and the Holy Camel."

Turning to the men, I said: "Hearken, all ye men! Your High Priest I shall take with me to heaven. Choose the next one in rank among your priests, to be my vicar on earth."

"We obey, Ca-ta-pha."

"Take possession of your rights then, O men! Accept your masters, O women! Thus you shall be strong and mighty always, and you shall multiply as the sands of the sea, and conquer all nations. Ca-ta-pha shall watch over you forever."

The women, taller and stronger than the men, but awed by my words, knelt, and the new masters placed their feet upon their necks, pronouncing pompously: "Slaves!" A man, with large hips, small beardless face, and much bejeweled, waved a fist at his late mistress, who towered over him. "Obey! Or you shall feel my lash!"

She bowed her head submissively.

Delighted, the men laughed and danced. Children were pushed disdainfully toward the women. "Take care of your brats!"

Kotikokura and I rode to the residence of the queen.

The palace was unguarded. I asked Kotikokura to remain outside, and await my orders.

Salome was sitting upon her throne, in the fantastic garments of savage royalty. She was alone. She had not changed since our meeting in Persia. I bowed and remained silent.

"Ca-ta-pha, you have won!"

"Your people are enraged at you. You must not remain here another moment."

"I know. I expected you."

"You expected me?"

"Don't forget that a woman, too, may learn something in India."

"Kotikokura will come with us."

"Of course," she said, annoyed.

"Has he been a source of displeasure to you?"

"He was too faithful to you!"

"Kotikokura," I called. He came in. "Kneel before Salome; she is your mistress while she remains with us."

He knelt. Salome bade him rise, and gave him her hand to kiss.

"We shall leave, Cartaphilus, by my secret exit, which leads to a road unknown even to Kotikokura. Three camels are waiting for us behind a cluster of trees."

"And my parrot, who has been screeching 'Carr-tarr-pharr' ever since I entered the palace?"

"The Sacred Parrot can remain here, to remind the people of Catapha." She laughed a little sarcastically.

"Is Ca-ta-pha inferior to other gods?" I asked.

"I am weary of men-gods."

"Perhaps god is both man and woman in one . . ." I suggested.

"Cartaphilus, at least, is a master of gallantry."

She touched my hand gently. I was too delighted to discuss gods or creeds.

24. LOVE MAGIC—SMOKE—SALOME SMILES

The moon was surrounded by an immense aureole whose reflection flooded the desert like a white sea. Salome, her eyes half closed, looked at me and smiled.

"Salome, were you really in Persia, or was it illusion?"

She laughed. "Of course I was."

"Were you in a magnificent palace, mistress of a thousand slaves, guarded by eunuchs?"

"Do you not know the power of mirrors and shadows dancing upon them? Are you not an adept in magic?"

I looked, incredulous. She patted my hands. "Cartaphilus will be a child . . . forever."

"In Damascus, that I might forget Salome, I bought a harem of a thousand women. Now and then I invited my friends. Many could not endure the delights, and died."

"And did the thousand women make you forget Salome?"

"They only intensified my yearning for her."

She closed her eyes.

"While all the time Salome never even thought of Cartaphilus . . ." I said, a little bitterly.

She did not answer for some time. "We may force ourselves to forget what we dare not remember. Forgetfulness may indicate deeper depths of emotion than recollection."

Salome filled two small ivory pipes, and offered me one. We watched in silence the smoke raise thin hands, trying to capture the moon.

I took her hands in mine, and caressed them gently.

"You are as romantic as you were in the days of Pilate, Cartaphilus—you remember, when you were my royal guard."

"And you are as cruel as you were then."

"I was not cruel, Cartaphilus. I resented your air of invincible masculinity, which made you strut about like a young turkey. You were handsome and clever. But what right had you to assume that Princess Salome would accept your caresses?"

"Was it so wrong to hope?"

"Had you only hoped, perhaps . . ."

"And in Persia?"

She laughed. "That was merely a little lesson in magic."

She stretched out her arms underneath her head. I took the pipe out of her mouth, filled it again and replaced it between her lips.

"Is it right to always torture me . . . always, Salome?" I asked. My words seemed to rise on the edge of the smoke, higher, higher.

"Am . . . I . . . torturing you . . . you?" Her words came down from where mine had stopped, and entered the bowl of my pipe.

"I love you, Salome."

"I know."

"Do you love me?"

"Perhaps."

"Say yes, Salome—for once!"

"For once, yes. Yes."

"Salome, my well-beloved!" I exclaimed, and lifting her head, I kissed her mouth.

"Salome, your lips are more delicious than crushed honey, daintier than the perfume of violets. Salome, my love. . . ."

Her robes disappeared suddenly, and I could not tell which gleamed the more—the moon or her body. I embraced her rapturously, murmuring: "Salome, my love, my love. Salome."

Our bodies mingled, merged, until we were like one great marble column, inextricable.

"Do you love me, Salome?"

"Yes, Cartaphilus, I love you."

"But you are not Salome."

"Who am I?"

"You are—Mary Magdalene!"

She laughed a little.

"I have found you at last, Mary! And your eyes are not yours."

"Whose are they?"

"They are John's, the friend of my youth! You are Mary and John. Cartaphilus has found at last love's perfection!"

"But you are not Cartaphilus!"

"Who am I?"

She whispered: "You are he. . . ."

"Who?"

"He who returns from the uttermost rim of time, who was one with me before the soul split asunder into male and female—my lover before Adam and Eve were shaped by the Potter."

Her voice died in the distance, and the smoke wreathed itself like a serpent around her naked limbs. . . .

Salome greeted me. "You have slept profoundly, Cartaphilus."

"And you?"

"I could not sleep. I watched the moon all night, meditating on the meaning of time and space. Woman, even Salome, always prefers mystery to truth and simplicity. And man—even Cartaphilus—always makes the mistake of dividing the human race into distinct elements, calling certain characteristics masculine, and others feminine. Yet he has lived long enough to know that there is no clear division between the sexes. A woman may have everything save the loins of man and may still be a woman. A female's hysterical scream may issue piercingly from a masculine throat. Every creature possesses the stigmata of both sexes; every man is a fraction of a woman, every woman is a fraction of a man. Each retains some aspect—some reminiscence, mental or anatomical—of a time when both sexes were one. Is not the son of Hermes and Aphrodite a god?"

"Alas! I can blame no one for your perversity!"

"I am surprised," she laughed, "that you have not invoked Lilith, the demon woman who was before Eve!"

"You are as wise and as cruel and as beautiful as Lilith! You are Lilith!"

"And you—Lucifer, perchance."

"And Kotikokura . . . Adam, the seed."

"We have reconstructed the cosmos, have we not, Cartaphilus?"

"How easy it is to build a universe, Salome! How difficult to know whether one has kissed the lips of Salome or the libidinous lips of a succubus who steals the strength of men's loins in their sleep."

We were in sight of civilization again. I took Salome's hands in mine. I looked at her long. "You are beautiful beyond compare, Salome. Your mouth inflames more than the kiss of a thousand lips, but it is no doubt best for Cartaphilus not to taste it, except in dreams."

"You say this, Cartaphilus, because you no longer desire me."

"It may be I no longer desire you," I said, irritated. "It may also be that we have analyzed ourselves too minutely to accept love as reality. We have crushed a star into fragments, and the winds have blown the flames and the ashes across the cosmos."

"Cartaphilus and Salome are the two sides of a coin . . . forever together, yet never facing each other," Salome replied.

"Neither," I conceded, "is complete without the other."

At the gate of the city, we embraced. Her lips tasted like Mary's lips, and as I looked up into her eyes, they were John's.

"It was not a dream," I whispered.

She smiled.

25. THE ARMY OF JESUS—THE EMPIRE OF PRESTER JOHN—CAN A MAN INVENT A LIE?

We rode slowly on our small Arab horses. Our armors creaked and moaned gently, while our long swords swung against our sides like the slow pendulums of clocks. We raised our helmets, looked at each other, and burst into laughter.

"Kotikokura, we have lived long enough to become Christian knights, fighting for the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre. Who knows what other curious and ridiculous things we shall fight for in years to come?"

Kotikokura slapped his thigh in merriment. . . .

In front of us, the Crusaders, the clamorous army of Jesus—pedestrians, riders on horseback, on asses, on oxen; wagons and carts, loaded with people and food—and crosses, crosses, always crosses, rising above the heads of animals and people, stiff like masts of boats, undulating with the rhythm of the carriers, leaning to one side or another.

Apart from these, as if fearing to be smothered by the stench and the dust and the noise, small companies of knights, luxuriously caparisoned, riding to conquest and fame, or death.

Slowly the army moved, swaying clumsily like a wounded rhinoceros. . . .

"Kotikokura, I do not understand it at all. How did this army, ragged, famished, undisciplined and almost

weaponless, defeat the splendid troops of the Mohammedans? What magic did it use? What strange power? Is it true indeed that Jesus wished to free His Sepulchre from the hands of the infidels? Did He strike fear into the hearts of His enemies, or— But why rack our brains, my friend, to understand a game which seems to have no permanent rules, and whose players—the gods—have no sense of honor?"

Kotikokura grinned.

Jerusalem! Was this Jerusalem, indeed? The hills and the sky were unchanged, but where were the houses, the streets, the cemeteries? I wandered about as in a dream, trying to find something that I recognized that could serve as a guide.

Kotikokura accompanied me silently, like a dog, faithful but puzzled.

I assiduously avoided one spot. Something told me that it had not changed, had remained perfectly intact, expecting my arrival—and perhaps another one's. And yet, like some magnet that draws metal toward it and will not relinquish—so the spot drew me. I walked as a somnambulist walks, choosing neither one road nor another, allowing my legs to find their way. They would lead me to the place, I was certain. . . .

Had I whirled about myself many times? Did the earth under my feet rock as a boat? What whirlwind was blowing against my ears? I seated myself upon a rock, my head tightened between my hands. I dared not stir.

Why had I come alone? Why had I not fled away? The hurricane howled on. The earth rocked. If I only dared to raise my head to see where I was, if I only— What was there to fear? If death, let it be death!

I stood up. What was this? Had I gone insane? Had all these centuries been merely a dream? Was I a captain in the Roman army? Was I no longer Cartaphilus, the wanderer?

Thou must tarry until I return! Thou must tarry until I return! Thou must tarry until I return!

"Stop!" I shouted.

The cross shook. Was it the wind? Was it the earth? His eyes like two long swords pierced my head. I screamed. It was the same agony I had once experienced. A thousand years had not obliterated its memory.

Tarry until I return! Tarry—

I staggered to my feet again. I looked at my hands. They were covered with blood. I wiped them in the dust. I began to run again, and did not stop until I reached the city. "What a storm we had," I said to a sentinel on his way to the barracks.

He glared at me. "My good man, you had better go home and lie down. You must be drunk, or ill."

"Was there no storm?"

"Of course not. It is as fine a spring day as you have ever witnessed. Hunger must have driven you out of your mind. The good Lord Jesus doesn't seem to be particularly overjoyed with the fact that we have recovered His Sepulchre. He lets us starve. Well, He knows best."

A soldier interrupted my thoughts.

"Sir, my master entreats you to follow me."

I accompanied him a few steps. He helped his master, a knight in full armor, from the horse, and left us alone together.

Was I in the presence of a great monarch? The armor, made of red gold, was encrusted with precious jewels. The helmet was surmounted by a large rare plume, the tips of which were studded with pearls. The buckle on the scabbard of his sword was a tortoise of lapis lazuli.

The knight raised the helmet. I looked bewildered.

"Don't you know me, Cartaphilus?"

"Salome!"

"You have just come from there, Cartaphilus?"

"Yes."

"Jerusalem is not for us, Cartaphilus. We are stirred by too many memories."

"Did you see—him?"

"Yes."

"Did he speak?"

"Yes."

"Was it magic, Salome?"

"If magic, it was stronger and stranger than ours. Farewell, Cartaphilus!" She barely touched my cheek with her lips.

"Since you command it—farewell, Salome, Queen of Women!"

She kissed my other cheek. "Even in hell, Cartaphilus would be gallant."

"And Salome a queen, even in hell."

"Presbyter Johannes, by the power and virtue of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords," the friar exclaimed, "will deliver us from the infidels and the heathens. His power is limitless and his lands are the richest in the world. Even the pebbles of the shores of his rivers are pure diamonds and the mountains are replete with gold. Presbyter Johannes shall come to deliver us. He shall come with his hundred thousand knights and three hundred thousand footmen; with the princes and kings of the seventy-two states that pay him tribute; with his chariots and elephants and strange creatures that devour ten men at one meal."

His listeners laughed, some pointed to their foreheads, one or two asked him a few questions. The friar expostulated against the Moors and the Saracens who had defeated the Crusaders, were knocking at the gates of Vienna, and threatened to destroy Europe and Christianity.

The people dispersed. Only Kotikokura and I remained. Prester John—Presbyter Johannes—for some obscure reason, troubled my mind, like a word that one tries to restore in time and space but cannot.

"Brother," I said to the friar, "where is his empire, and who is Presbyter Johannes?"

He approached my ear and whispered mysteriously, "He is John, the Apostle."

"But John the Apostle is dead."

"The Lord Jesus has kept His beloved disciple alive and has made him great and powerful that he may save the cross from destruction."

John, I mused. Could it really be he? Speaking of John, Jesus said to Peter: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" There was a rumor among the Christians based on these words that John could not die. But Jesus merely said: "*If* I will." Had He willed it? Had His love wrought for John what His hate had wrought for me?

"Whence, brother friar, will Prester John start?" I asked.

"From the center of his empire, which is the center of the earth—a far-off land, thousands of miles beyond Jerusalem, which, however, he will deliver first."

I gave him a coin.

"Let us go in search of this fabulous land, Kotikokura, and see what scrap of reality suffices to create a legend."

The reputation of Presbyter Johannes or Prester John was much more widespread than I suspected. Some laughed at the notion, some disputed; others proved his existence or nonexistence by the Scriptures. But everywhere his name was mentioned and discussed.

We wandered about, taking now one road, now another, according to the vague and contradictory directions we received, stopping only to recuperate and replenish our supplies. The farther Europe disappeared behind us, the less resplendent became the empire of Prester John.

"We are on the right path, Kotikokura, for falsehood shines like a sun, but truth is a modest jewel."

The people were assembling in the public square, mostly fishermen and small merchants, dressed in the manner of the Hebrews of the time of Jesus. Their faces, too, their angular gestures, and their incessant disputations wrenched time back a thousand years.

"What is the name of this country, my friend?" I asked one.

"Ours is the Realm of God, and yonder comes our patriarch, Prester John—may his name be blessed!"

A man, apparently seventy or seventy-five, approached gravely, followed by several priests, if judged by their garb, but rabbis by their long beards and curls. John carried in his arm the Torah, while from his neck hung a large crucifix.

The people bowed and crossed themselves, and made room for the procession which stopped where four fishermen deposited upon a stone platform a large armchair, in the shape of two lions from whose foreheads rose grotesque horns—stars surmounted by crosses.

Presbyter Johannes seated himself. The people knelt. Two priests sprinkled holy water and scattered incense. Johannes rose. I watched him intently. Was it really John? His eyes, perhaps, but where was their brightness?

He raised his hand, blessed the people in Hebrew, then made the sign of the cross over them.

Could that be his voice, hard, staccato, sounding like iron struck against stone?

The priests covered their heads with tallithim, and bowing and beating their breasts incessantly, chanted an

old Hebrew prayer, mixed with barbaric Latin. The people, still kneeling, repeated at intervals a phrase or a word.

The ceremony over, the patriarch rose. His right arm raised, he exclaimed: "Do not forget our mission, brethren! We are the chosen of the Lord to conquer the heathens and the unbelievers. We shall go forth embattled—mighty knights who will deliver Jerusalem and the world. We shall bring perfection unto man. He shall be happy and rich beyond his present dreams. The mountains shall open at his command, and, lo! he shall find them filled with gold. The sands on the river banks shall turn to precious jewels; the fish shall be odorous as flowers. Yea, we shall bring Eden once more unto the earth. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and David, His Father, and Moses whose word is the word of God, now and forever, Amen!"

"Amen," the people repeated.

Johannes made the sign of the cross over them. The people dispersed. The priests helped their patriarch descend and followed him in silence.

I seated myself at the edge of the shore and meditated. Kotikokura, bored, threw pebbles into the water.

"Have you ever seen, my friend, greater poverty than here? Even in China—you remember—during the revolution, the people seemed more prosperous."

Kotikokura continued to throw pebbles into the water.

"Perhaps you are right, Kotikokura. It is just as rational to throw pebbles into a river as to endeavor to discover logic in the universe. I think I shall join you."

Suddenly, I felt someone grasp my shoulder. I turned around.

"Who are you?" the man asked harshly. "Why are you disturbing the waters?"

"Forgive a little innocent pleasure, sir."

"There is no innocent pleasure. Every mundane pleasure is tainted with sin."

"Will you not forgive two strangers their great ignorance?"

"It is not for me to forgive, but for our Lord. Come along!"

The man we followed was dressed as a priest, but about his waist dangled a long sword.

"Will you enlighten me, sir," I asked. "I am not quite certain, as yet, in what country we landed and who the king may be."

He did not answer. I repeated my question.

"He who does not recognize virtue when he sees it, and does not distinguish God's own country from man's, deserves no answer."

"How shall a man distinguish God's own country from man's?"

He turned around and glared at me. "How dare you blaspheme against Yahweh and Jesus! Is it not self-evident that our country is the most beautiful, the most blessed of all? Have you not heard the words of our Master this morning? Do you doubt—" He placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword.

"How can I doubt when I see so much zeal? Is not zeal the sign of truth? Can a lie inspire such passion?"

He dropped his hand and ordered us to follow him.

The Court of Justice was a long room, dimly lit. At one angle, a large armchair, the exact counterpart of the one I had seen in the square—or was it perhaps the same one—upon two wooden lions with grotesque horns. Opposite was an enormous cross with an agonized Christ and the stone tablets of Moses.

Presbyter Johannes entered, followed by four priests. He seated himself. The priests remained standing, two on either side.

My captor crossed himself, and made a long complaint against Kotikokura and myself. We were disturbing the peace of the river; we were blasphemous and cynical; we were frivolous, and preferred sin and pleasure to virtue and righteousness. He asked that justice be unadulterated with pity.

Presbyter Johannes stared at me, his brows knit. Did he recognize me?

He ordered everybody save myself and Kotikokura to leave the courtroom and continued to stare at me for a long while, saying nothing.

"Once more you have blasphemed against our Lord!" he thundered.

"John . . ." I said mildly.

"Yes, I am John. And you are Isaac—Isaac Laquedem!"

"John," I whispered, almost pathetically.

"You rejected the words of the Lamb and you still wander like a hunted beast." His lips twisted into a malevolent snarl. "I warned you, but you shrugged your shoulders. Do you believe in Jesus now?"

I shook my head.

"Cursed wanderer and companion of men-beasts!" His forefinger pointed at me, his words sharp and biting as a whip, he continued: "And now you have come into God's realm, and once more you have mocked Him! Once more you have rejected Him. You are neither man nor beast, neither Jew nor Christian, but a monster possessed by the evil one."

"John—"

"I could release you from your bondage; I could give you peace at last, but I will not until you accept our Master and kneel before His Cross."

I shook my head.

"No punishment that I can conceive can add to your curse. Go . . . wander again! Tarry, until the Lord Himself shall visit the earth again. And woe unto you, Isaac, when that day comes to pass!"

I did not budge.

"Antichrist! Beast!" he shouted. Closing his eyes and raising his right hand, he continued: "I see the beast rise out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns are crosses and upon his foreheads the names of his blasphemy. I see the Lord coming to slaughter the beast. I see seven golden candlesticks. And in the midst of the seven candlesticks, I see the Son of Man: His head and His hair are white as wool, as white as snow, and His eyes are as a flame of fire. He has in His right hand seven stars, and out of His mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance is as the sun, shining in its strength. . . ."

His teeth clenched, his legs stiffened. Two bits of foam dotted the corners of his mouth. I remembered that in his youth he had suffered from epileptic seizures. I was on the point of raising him in my arms as I did, so long ago, and speaking to him tenderly.

I yearned to whisper to him: "John, how have you forgotten your friend? I am Isaac, he who loved you and whom you loved. Do you not remember the hours we spent together? Do you not remember that in each other's company we discovered woman? Oh, the starry nights

when we walked together along the shore of the Jordan and upon the hills that surround Jerusalem! Oh, the golden words we uttered! John . . . has your heart turned to stone?"

The foam trickled over his beard. He had the appearance of some unclean animal. Could not Jesus relieve him of his affliction? He gave life without improving upon it. I had improved mine, but in spite of him. . . .

John opened his bloodshot eyes.

"Go! Continue your devil's work that your soul may become blacker and blacker. Fight the Lord, neglect virtue and sanctity that your punishment may be the greater. I shall remain in this place. When the Lord returns, He shall find one spot where His gospel is inviolate, one disciple more faithful than Peter. . . ."

Still jealous of Peter, I thought. My search for John is ended. That which may be found, is it worth the seeking? If time has such evil power, may I never behold the face of Mary again.

"Go!"

"Come, Kotikokura," I whispered.

I took Kotikokura's arm and walked out slowly.

26. DO THE STARS HAVE A PURPOSE?—DOÑA CRISTINA'S INVITATION—A TEMPLE OF LOVE—DON JUAN

THE MEDITERRANEAN had never been so beautiful, nor I so sad.

Kotikokura shrugged his shoulders and twisted his mouth. He was jealous. Whenever I mentioned John's youth and beauty, he became irritable or made gestures of depreciation.

John! Was it possible? Could a man change so, or was it merely a normal development? Was the youthful rebel destined to become the middle-aged, hard, relentless zealot? Must the beautiful courtesan change into a hag, loveless and unforgiving?

"What shall I seek now, Kotikokura? Have I not already found what I sought?"

Kotikokura continued to grin, not at all displeased by my disillusionment.

"And yet, I cannot live without a purpose. It is foolish. Do the stars have a purpose? Does the Mediterranean have a purpose? Why should I? And yet—whither shall we go? We shall never clutch the stars, Kotikokura. The higher we grow, the farther away the stars shall fly, like birds teasing the rod of the fowler."

The rain splashed into the Guadalquivir, churning it like butter. To the right, the Mezquita, now surmounted by an immense cross, glittered through the long perpen-

dicular trellises of the rain, like a loving face playing hide-and-seek. Farther up the hill, the Alcazar, its contours spoiled by recent repairs, looked disconsolate, like a man who has outlived his glory.

The rain stopped suddenly. The sun broke through the clouds, and the puddles our footsteps made glistened.

"Kotikokura, this is Córdoba, the pride of the Moors, when we were on the road to Jerusalem to deliver the Holy Sepulchre. Whatever is beautiful and lovely was done before the Christians captured the city. The hand of the conqueror has weighed heavily upon it. Where are the palaces that once flourished upon the banks of this lovely river—the Palace of Contentment, the Palace of Flowers, the Palace of Lovers? Nothing save arches and walls, like skeletons of dead men. But even the arches are more beautiful than the new palaces of the conquerors."

Keepers of wine shops wiped their tables and chairs, wet from the rain. Beggars, men and women, extended their hands, mumbling prayers and benedictions, and, if their requests remained ungranted, curses. Friars and nuns and priests passed in long procession, until the black of their garbs gave the impression of night disintegrated, cutting fantastic figures upon the white canvas of day.

A woman approached us. She was dressed in mourning, but her face showed no indication of sorrow.

"The gentlemen are strangers, are they not?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Strangers are lonesome . . ."

"Generally."

"What is more consoling to lonesome gentlemen than a woman—young, beautiful and loving?"

I looked at her.

"No, no, señor, I am not speaking of myself. I am Doña Cristina del Torno y Rodriguez, a poor widow," she sighed. "I have no claim either to beauty or youth, but —" She approached my ear, rising a little on her toes. "I know where you can find both beauty and youth. Not overexpensive either, señor, and not too far from here. You will not regret it. My Palace of Love is the finest in the city. Even Don Juan honors me with his visits."

"Don Juan?" I asked. "In spite of his thousand sweethearts?"

"He is insatiable, señor. He is the handsomest caballero in the world, and so generous."

"Do you expect him in the near future?"

She knit her brows. "Why, yes . . . I expect him this very evening. I have—" She placed a forefinger to her lips, "a virgin for him from the country—a real virgin. What does the excellent señor prefer?"

"Very well, take us over."

Taking our arms, she walked between us, proudly chattering about the virtues of her girls and the glory of Don Juan who once, while her husband was still alive, had honored her with his affection.

"Was he unusual as a lover?" I asked.

"He was cold and cruel, and that pleases me. I like men to dominate me, even as the lion tamer masters his beasts."

She looked at Kotikokura and squeezed his arm. He grinned.

The walls of the waiting room into which we were ushered were painted with imitations of the Pompeian Catacombs. The furniture was of a neo-Moorish type—heavy, bulky things, overcarved, overornamented. A servant brought us wine. Doña Cristina disappeared for a few minutes and returned dressed in a kimono of red silk, embroidered with large yellow flowers. Around her neck she wore a rosary of immense beads.

She balanced her hips coquettishly, looking intently at Kotikokura, whose eyes darted from one corner to the other.

She took our arms and led us into the salon. A stifling but not unpleasant smell of perfumes mingled with human flesh pervaded the place. The women greeted us with giggling and words of double meaning. They reclined on couches and on the floor, their skirts raised to their knees and further, and their bodices half open, as if they had been suddenly disturbed in the process of dressing.

"Wine!" one called out.

"Sweets!" another one.

"Wine, sweets, wine, sweets!" they all shouted in unison.

Doña Cristina pressed lightly Kotikokura's arm and sighed.

"Let there be wine and sweets!" I ordered.

The women clapped their hands, and shouted: "Long live the señores!"

Doña Cristina pinched Kotikokura's leg. His face was flushed. His hands trembled a little. I whispered into her ear. "My friend is inexperienced. He is younger than he looks."

She raised her arms. "Santa Maria! Santa Maria! Jesus!" She pressed him to her voluminous chest. "My love, my bear, my lion!"

A servant looked in. "Doña Cristina!"

"What do you want?" she asked irritably.

"Don Juan!" he stammered.

She dashed out and re-entered, preceded by a man still young, but already scarred by two parallel wrinkles on either cheek, and his forehead and temples showed signs of nascent baldness. He placed his left hand, covered with rings, upon his hip and looked about haughtily. Upon his chest glittered a small cross studded with precious stones.

"Foreign noblemen," Doña Cristina whispered into his ear, trembling a little.

Don Juan bowed. I returned the salutation.

"Don Juan," Doña Cristina said in a low tone of voice, "I have the virgin. She is as pretty as a flower—plump, red-cheeked, corresponding exactly to your specifications."

"Are you sure she is—"

"I swear by the Holy Virgin."

Don Juan turned to me. "It is an appalling state of affairs, señor. Girls of thirteen and fourteen are no longer virgins. I often think they are not even born untouched."

"Is virginity so important?"

"You are foreigners, gentlemen, and you are not aware, perhaps, of the terrible ravishes of the new disease."

"What disease?"

"A kind of leprosy. The last Crusaders brought it with them from the Holy Land. There is no safety except in virginity and in the *cordon de sureté*—the girdle of chastity. Romance has become more dangerous than warfare. You cannot be certain of any woman. Who knows how many of Doña Cristina's girls are capable of inflicting wounds more dreadful than those of the javelin?"

Doña Cristina threw up her arms in horror.

"Don Juan, my girls are all as pure as virgins. The gentlemen that visit them are the finest in Spain, and—" pointing to us—"in the world."

"Come, come, my little one, do not get exasperated." He placed his hand upon her shoulder. "I mentioned that only by way of example." And, addressing me, "It is true, indeed, señor; this is the only safe Temple of Love in Córdoba."

Doña Cristina kissed his bejeweled hand. The girls laughed and drank another cup to Don Juan, the incomparable lover.

Doña Cristina pressed Kotikokura's hand and whispered into his ear, "My bear! Tonight, you are mine."

Kotikokura blushed.

27. KOTIKOKURA, THE LION—THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF DON JUAN—I DISCUSS LOVE WITH DON JUAN—DON JUAN'S SECRET—I KILL DON JUAN

It was nearly noon. I opened the shutter, and looked out. At a distance, the Guadalquivir glistened like a long silver stripe on an officer's coat. Still further, the hills rounded at the top as if a hand had smoothed them. The whiteness of the houses no longer annoyed me. It served as a fine background for the trees, which cast long gray, trembling shadows. The chimes of the Mezquita, whose belfry towered about the city, rang slowly, lazily, inviting not so much to prayer as to slumber.

Who was I? Where was I? I rubbed my eyes vigorously, and laughed. I was in the anteroom of Doña Cristina's Palace of Love—the purest in Córdoba which even Don Juan, the incomparable lover, frequented. Don Juan—still with his virgin from the country—and Kotikokura, the bear, the lion, had not yet unclasped the arms of his love.

Kotikokura entered quietly, and stood in back of me. I made believe I was not aware of his presence. He coughed a little and shuffled his feet. I turned. His head was bent, and he looked embarrassed.

"Well, my bear, my lion, why the sheepish look?"

He pressed my hand to his lips.

"Has the lady bitten off—your nose, Kotikokura?"

He made a gesture of disgust. "Woman!"

I laughed.

"Woman, Kotikokura, is an attitude. She is either the loveliest thing in the world—or the unloveliest. It all depends upon what you seek in her, and how much you are willing to forgive in advance."

"You are an old hag! I shall never cross your threshold again!" Don Juan shouted from the next room.

"But señor, is it my fault? How could I tell?" Doña Cristina whimpered.

"Why don't you instruct your women more adroitly?"

"She says she tried her very best, señor, but you were not in the mood to be pleased. . . ."

The door opened brusquely. Don Juan came out. Doña Cristina, bent in two, her arms outstretched, followed him.

"Señor, señor!"

He threw her a purse. "Take it—and do not let me see your face again."

"What is money to me if—"

Don Juan placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword. "Go away—or I shall run you through like a sow."

She snatched the purse and rushed out. Around her neck I noticed two fingermarks, which I recognized as Kotikokura's.

"The stupid calf!" Don Juan exclaimed, walking up and down the room. His eyes were swollen a little from lack of sleep, and his face was drawn. He looked his age.

"Why do men rave about virgins, señor? They are awkward and clumsy and afford no satisfaction. Nobody wants wine which has been unfermented. Why do they insist upon virginity? The hen will cackle about it too. Don Juan was not in the mood! Is it for a man to be in the mood or for a woman to create it? Only boors are really hungry. A gentleman's appetite is stirred by an apéritif. Not in the mood! Had she had an ounce of brain or training, or lacking these, an instinctive flair—"

I remembered my experience with Poppaea. Had Don Juan failed to be—Don Juan?"

"Perhaps, señor," I suggested, "you were distracted by something or other?"

"Perhaps."

"I have traveled in many lands, Don Juan, and have known women of all races and of all colors. Everywhere

man complains against them. Woman has been compared to all creatures, wild or tamed, and still has not been explained."

He looked at me, placing his hand upon his hip and closing a little his eyes. "Señor, from the first glance, I recognized in you a kindred soul."

I bowed.

"You seek, evidently, as I do, the ultimate—"

"Unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged, Don Juan."

"Unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged," he repeated. "That is it! This is what I have been seeking. To know what one seeks is as difficult at times as to find it. Señor, you have the lasting gratitude of Don Juan. I swear it by the sword and the cross!" He touched both.

He muttered to himself, "Unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged! But señor, I forget the seconds of Don Fernando must be waiting for me at my home. May I ask you to be my guest?" Looking up at Kotikokura. "My guests, gentlemen, for the rest of your sojourn in Córdoba."

We bowed. I thanked him.

"The air here is stifling, putrid." He screwed up his nose. He reminded me at that moment of an oversensitive and fastidious young woman.

Don Juan's mansion was a neo-Moorish building, situated upon the bank of the Guadalquivir. A rectangular garden in which the flowers and trees were arranged with mathematical precision surrounded it on all sides, so that only the upper part of the house was visible when approached.

"I hate irregularity and disorder," he told me. "I prefer to dominate nature and arrange the colors and sizes of my flowers in a harmony which pleases my eye. But I suppose this is due to my masculine temperament. I am logical in all things."

This regularity, on the contrary, struck me as profoundly feminine. It seemed to me more like the fussiness of an old maid.

The walls were covered with swords, weapons, heads of wild boars and other mementoes of Don Juan's masculine prowess. Two small parrots screeched "Bienvenido," ceaselessly. Several tiny birds in cages flapped their wings, warbling and whistling.

Don Juan invited me to sit at the table. Kotikokura, a large jug of wine between his knees, seated himself in front of the fireplace.

"A friend of mine," remarked Don Juan, "a young poet, has expressed my life in a poem. This poem shall be my epitaph.

At the flutter of my wings
The breezes quivered,
And a thousand flowers unclasped
Their honeyed treasures.
Alas! I died of sheer despair
And lonesomeness
In the golden chalice of a rose.

"And a thousand women were unable to dispel your gloom, Don Juan?"

"Only while their embraces lasted, and frequently not that long. A thousand women. . . . What does it mean, señor? One obliterates the memory of the other, leaving us empty-handed. A man always says: 'This one is different. This one's lips will burn the flesh and touch the soul.' But they hardly scorch the skin."

"Woman is an attitude," I replied, repeating my remark to Kotikokura. "It all depends upon what one seeks in her and how much one is willing to forgive in advance."

The servant whispered something into Don Juan's ear.

"No, no—not today."

The servant left.

"The amiable countess expects me." He laughed suddenly. "I poisoned two dogs, bribed half a dozen servants, and nearly broke my neck climbing into her room. Besides, her husband is a favorite of the king. I jeopardized my head to go with her through the absurd motions of conjugation. Why did I risk so much? Señor, she has a beauty spot on her left breast. It is really a blemish, yet it promised so much! I assure you, señor, she was not one bit different from all the others. I should have known! She was my nine hundred and ninety-seventh."

"Pardon me, Don Juan, but is it really possible to keep an exact record of every amour?"

He laughed. "I have an album, señor, in which I put the initials and the number of each woman—with a few remarks, generally of a depreciating nature: too fat, too thin, too white, too dark, too insistent, too cold, bored me

at the critical moment, reminded me of a parrot, a dog, a cat; also the difficulties encountered—the duels fought, the husbands duped, etc., etc."

"A strange document which will be of value to posterity," I remarked. "Many a poet will compose sonnets to the world's master lover."

"But, señor—I have never loved."

He seemed like a child with countless toys, enjoying none, stamping upon them, casting them aside, bored and irritated.

"My friend," Don Juan said suddenly, "you have mentioned unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged. What does it mean? Is it acquired by one of the drugs that the Crusaders have brought from the East, or the Moors from China? I have experimented with all. The poppy whose sap I consumed never made me experience unendurable pleasure, or if it seemed unendurable, it was never indefinitely prolonged."

"It is not the poppy, not a drug, señor."

"Señor, I swear by the cross that if it is a secret, I shall keep it until I am dust within dust. Don Juan never breaks his promise—to a man."

"Don Juan, unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged is possible only for him who loves woman. It is neither a drug nor an incantation, but a long and profound study, a gradual training, until the senses perceive with the clarity of a third eye, an eye that pierces like a sharp tool. It transmutes the body into a conflagration. It turns vulgar metal to gold. Such knowledge, however, is only for the elect, for those who truly love—woman."

"Señor," he said, slightly irritably, "this is the second time you have mentioned the fact that one must love woman. I do not understand."

"Don Juan, is it the truth you seek or polite conversation?"

After a pause, he said a little hoarsely, "From you—the truth."

"Here is the truth, Don Juan, as it appears to me. You do not love woman, or else you would not pursue her with such vehemence and bravado. Each new conquest is proclaimed to the world. Don Juan has captured one more! Everybody smiles, admires, and envies. If you loved woman, you would concentrate, would rejoice in the pleasure afforded by one, not in the conquest of many.

Your multiple amours are merely an attempt to seek refuge from your own disgust . . ."

Don Juan breathed heavily and tightened his fist around the cup.

"You do not love woman," I insisted, like a prophet of evil. "Your amorous conquests rise from the endeavor to convince both yourself and the world that you are capable of loving her, that there is neither a spiritual nor physical deficiency in you."

"Whom do I love, if not woman?" he asked, standing up and glaring at me. "Señor, whom do I love, if not woman?" he reiterated.

"Perhaps no one now, but at one time, long ago, had you obeyed your nature, you would have preferred—"

"What?"

"Narcissus-like, you were enamoured of yourself, or the image of yourself—in another man."

He burst into a hearty laugh, but then stopped short. "A man! Señor, what a jest! I am the most manly man of Spain, not an effeminate fop. Look at my arms! Touch the muscle! It is iron, señor!"

"Your eternal insistence upon your masculinity proves that you are not sure of yourself. When one is certain of it, it is unnecessary for him to emphasize its existence."

"Señor," he shouted, "you presume too much . . ." and struck the table a powerful blow.

Kotikokura awakened with a start. Don Juan was about to strike the table again when Kotikokura jumped forward and grasped his arm.

"How dare you!" Don Juan shouted. I made no sign. Kotikokura released his arm.

"Don Juan," I said, "if a guest's opinion so upsets his host, it is best for the guest to withdraw."

He became almost sentimental. "Forgive me, señor. Wine and the harrowing experiences of the day paralyze my understanding, and crush the instinctive hospitality of a Spanish gentleman. I beg you not to go." He stretched out his hand, which I shook.

He clapped his hands. A servant entered.

"Jaime, go fetch Mahmud the Moor and his band. Tell him to bring a few dancers, men and women. Tonight we dine in the garden and make merry in honor of our guests."

The servant left.

Don Juan laughed, slapping his thigh. "Señor, you are magnificent! What you said was almost convincing. Your sense of humor is as keen as a blade. Your love of paradox is delightful. I am very fortunate to have met you." Turning to Kotikokura, "And you, señor—your fist is more powerful than steel. You nearly broke my arm. I congratulate you. One more cup, gentlemen, to our most Catholic king, and to—woman!"

We drank. Don Juan recounted gallant anecdotes and amorous escapades. He laughed uproariously, but his eyes were melancholy and distracted.

I regretted having spoken. A mere mortal cannot endure the truth, uncoated with the sweets of illusion. It was too late to undo the harm. I had a premonition that Don Juan's last days had come.

28. GILLES DE RETZ IN PARIS—TREVISAN DOES A MIRACLE—BLUEBEARD'S WIFE —MY PUPIL ANNE

CHARLES VI was no longer seated precariously on the edge of his throne, the English no longer menaced France with invasion, and the ashes of the Maid of Arc were cold and sparkless. The Parisians could devote themselves to the brewing of the elixir which would give them eternal youth and the Philosopher's Stone. Everybody toyed with magic. Thirty thousand sorcerers were reputed to be in Paris.

Meanwhile, the Seine flowed on. At night, the stars slumbered upon it; at noon, the sun sprawled upon it; and from time to time, barges and boats cut across its breast, like long blunt knives.

Riding on a black charger, Monsieur Gilles de Laval, Lord of Retz and Maréchal de France, arrived in Paris. Two hundred horsemen followed him. A bishop, a dean, vicars, archdeacons, and chaplains preceded. They were dressed luxuriously in robes of scarlet and furs, according to rank, and carried crucifixes of gold and silver, encrusted with jewels. Twenty-five choristers sang litanies and triumphant marches.

The snow fell steadily, and Gilles de Retz, either unwilling to wet his face, or deep in meditation, kept his head upon his chest. Only his beard was visible—a mag-

nificent growth of hair, metallic in its blueness and combed like an Assyrian monarch's.

Bernard Trevisan, of Padua, magician and alchemist, had invited the lord to his castle, on the outskirts of the capital, situated so close to the shore of the Seine, that its shadow head downward forever bathed in its waters.

Gilles de Retz came to Paris to sell the seignory of Ingrande, in spite of the protest of his presumptive heirs, to obtain funds for his experiments and his household. But perhaps more important to the maréchal was the promise of Trevisan to perform the famous miracle of Albertus Magnus—the change of seasons; also his desire to meet me. I had introduced myself to Trevisan, to Nicholas Flamel, whose real age no one knew, and to Francis Prelati, a countryman of Trevisan, deeply versed in black magic, as an adept from India.

The guests were invited into the garden where the table was set for the banquet. The snow had stopped falling, but the ground and the trees were thickly covered with it. The Count of Raymond was indignant and threatened to leave.

Trevisan smiled. "Everything will be well, Count. May I ask you for a little patience?"

The guests, shivering, seated themselves, the maréchal at the head of the table, Trevisan at his right, and I at his left.

Bernard Trevisan rose, closed his eyes in meditation, and stretched his right arm slowly. Suddenly a scepter, studded at intervals with rubies and emeralds, rose from the depths of the earth, balancing itself gently, until his hand grasped it.

He opened his eyes, smiled enigmatically, raised the staff above his head and waved it three times to each of the cardinal points of the compass. Then he stamped the ground with it nine times in measured beats, uttering words of the Kabala.

The guests riveted their attention upon his movements, breathless.

A little hypnotism, I thought, is always a serviceable thing.

Bernard Trevisan exclaimed in a commanding voice that seemed to come from the depths of a barrel: "Retire, winter! Release thy grip! Retire! Let it be summer!"

The snow disappeared. The trees grew heavy with green leaves. Birds perched upon the bushes. A breeze charged with perfume floated about our faces.

The guests rose, applauded vehemently, and shouted: "Long live Bernard Trevisan! Long live Bernard Trevisan!"

Gilles de Retz embraced the magician. "Bernard Trevisan, you are indeed the supreme master of the greatest art!"

The voice of the maréchal was mellow and gentle, tinged a little with sorrow.

Nicholas Flamel congratulated the host. "But, master, I notice that not one bird either chirps or sings. In the summer, the birds are pleasantly noisy."

Bernard was nonplussed. He pulled at his short beard, and waved his staff nervously. The guests became impatient. A few coughed significantly.

I moved away from the rest, clapped my hands several times and commanded—"Birds, sing! Birds, sing!"

The birds began to chirp and sing. The guests stared at me in astonishment. Gilles de Retz grasped my hands and looked intently into my eyes, as if seeking something within them that he had lost or forgotten.

Bernard bowed before me. "Prince, *you* are the master of us all." Turning to the rest, he extolled the esoteric wisdom of India, compared to which all Occidental knowledge was child's play. He drank to my health. The banquet became a celebration in my honor.

The next day, at the side of Gilles de Retz I rode triumphantly through the city of Paris.

"Prince," Gilles addressed me, "your ability to make the birds sing proves the superiority of your magic."

"My lord exaggerates. Bernard Trevisan is world-famous."

"Fame increases in proportion to distance, Prince. Bernard's most striking accomplishment is the change of seasons, which we witnessed last night, and you added the final, the supreme magic ingredient from the treasure trove of the East."

"And Nicholas Flamel, Monsieur le Maréchal? I hear he has discovered the Philosopher's Stone . . ."

Gilles de Retz laughed. "He is an old scoundrel, and his Philosopher's Stone is a charming fiction. He acquired

immense wealth by exorbitant usury, and to account for it, that the courts might not prosecute him, he spread the rumor that he possessed the Philosopher's Stone."

"And what of Francis Prelati?"

The maréchal's eyes darkened and blazed, but he made no answer.

"There must be," he said a little later, "somewhere a magic formula that renews our youth. The Philosopher's Stone, which at a touch turns base metals to gold, is but a means, not an end. I need vast fortunes to procure eternal youth. Is it possible to discover the formula, Prince?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps," he repeated sadly. "It is always perhaps. And meanwhile, life slips by and youth withers. I am already thirty-four years old, Prince."

"I am thirty."

"We must hurry, Prince, and discover the secret."

We passed out of the last gate of the city and entered into the Bois de Boulogne. The naked branches of the trees formed a wide canopy over which the reflection of the sun made embroideries in red gold.

Our approach to the Castle of Champtoce was greeted by trumpets and chimes. At the gate, a hundred children, boys and girls dressed in white, showered us with roses. The maréchal patted the heads and cheeks of the children.

"You shall be rewarded according to your deserts, my little ones," he said tenderly, his voice somewhat husky.

I was installed in the right wing of the castle which overlooked the garden. Kotikokura shared my suite.

The next morning the maréchal invited me to hunt with him.

His retainers wore sumptuous attire. The horses were bedecked with gorgeous trappings. Two dozen hounds pulled impatiently at their leashes. Gilles de Retz, resplendent in his uniform, greeted me cordially and bade me ride at his side.

As we reached the middle of the forest, the maréchal and I dashed away from the rest. We leaped from our horses. The maréchal took my arm and we walked slowly.

"It is not the actual hunting that pleases me," he said,

"but the beauty of the horses and the men—and the captured animals, still alive, breathing their last, scarlet with their own blood." My eyes tried to delve into his soul.

He pressed my arm. "Do you love the sight of blood, Cartaphilus?"

"The mystery of life is the mystery of the blood."

"Cartaphilus, my brother, to you I may with impunity reveal the unrevealable."

"Speak!"

"I do not worship God. I find His work mediocre. The pleasures He offers are like bones left over at the end of a feast. He prefers innocence to experience, stupidity to intelligence, dullness to wit." He looked at me, smiling ironically, intent upon seeing the effect of his words.

"My lord, what you say is too evident to require demonstration. Alas, there is no other God but God."

He stamped his sword and exclaimed. "To the illuminati, we may drop all pretenses. You know there is another God—surpassing the God of Heaven—the god who honors the rebel . . ."

"Who?"

"Satan. He is the essence of intelligence and wit. He is the spirit of investigation. He teaches us to drink, drink deep, from the cup of pleasure and beauty."

"You have merely reversed the order, my lord. You have only changed names. God has become the Devil, and the Devil, God."

"Having reversed the order, we have changed the entire conception of life. Yahweh has become the Black One, horny and monstrous, and his virtues abhorrent. Satan is luminous and beautiful and Sin the Supreme Good."

Two servants approached, carrying upon their shoulders on a pole a young deer. The blood made a thin zigzag line according to the movements of the men. Several dogs followed, barking and stopping from time to time to lap the blood. Their muzzles were red as the noses of drunkards.

"My lord," one of the servants addressed Gilles de Retz, "the first trophy."

"Good!" His eyes dazzled with a light such as I had seen darting from the eyes of a demon in a temple of Egypt, a phosphorescent light, a light that resembled the whiteness of knives and swords.

They placed their burden upon the ground. The animal's body shivered. The maréchal jerked out the arrow which protruded half way from the deer's belly. The animal raised himself and fell back, his legs slightly in the air. Blood splashed the maréchal's boots. He breathed heavily and tightened his fists. For a moment his pupils were glazed, his limbs stiffened. Then he relaxed. He patted the dogs, lightly beating their sides with his palm. The dogs wagged their tails.

The maréchal's conception of Satan pleased me. His intellectual diabolism was a new weapon in my warfare against Jesus.

Gilles had not yet spoken to me about women. Weird scandals about his affairs were gathering about him like a flock of birds. He had recently wedded Catherine of the House of Thouars.

Who was Catherine? I never caught even a glimpse of her garments. Was it true that he kept her a prisoner in the tower that rose about the castle like an immense mitre?

I walked through the garden. The smoke of roasting oxen and sheep curled above the trees. The maréchal, despite financial difficulties, would not close his gates to the hundreds of people that came from all parts of the country, and his generosity would not allow any curtailment in food and drinks.

I heard footsteps in back of me, and turned around. Two women, arm in arm, walked slowly. When they became aware of my presence, they stopped, almost frightened. I bowed.

"Prince Cartaphilus!" one of them exclaimed. "My brother-in-law often speaks to us about you." Turning to the other woman, "You remember, Catherine, what Gilles—"

"Yes, I remember, Anne," she said, and sighed.

Her voice had an uncommon sadness about it, and her face seemed almost unearthly.

Catherine was dressed in a black velvet dress whose high collar touched the chin, and her blond hair was surrounded by a thin gold band, studded with a large emerald.

"We are taking a walk in the garden, Prince. Will you accompany us?" Anne asked.

The only resemblance to her sister was her height and her aquiline nose. She was more heavily built; her hair was black; her lips sensuous, and her eyes gray and languorous, had nothing spiritual about them. She was dressed in a gown of white silk. About her throat was a necklace of pearls.

"I have read that the women of India possess unusual beauty. Is that true, Prince?" asked Anne.

I answered, "My memory of the women of India has been eclipsed, madame, since I have had the pleasure of seeing the women of France."

Anne blushed and her eyes closed a little.

Catherine sighed. "Sister, I am weary. I must go back. Remain a while longer with the prince. You need air . . . and conversation." She smiled.

She kissed Anne, bent her knee slightly before me, and left. I was not displeased. The matter that interested me most at the moment could not be discussed in the presence of so ethereal a being. . . .

"Shall we take that road, Madame? It seems to lead away from the smoke and noisy merrymaking that takes place in the castle."

"My brother-in-law will never be persuaded to abandon his whim of being the provider of the riffraff of the world. Alchemists, charlatans, visionaries, gypsies, whatnot. Is it well for a Maréchal of France to associate with such people?"

I did not answer.

"My poor sister is distressed. She occupies the tower to escape the din. Even there she finds little rest. In her condition the excitement is most untimely."

"Is she ill?"

"No, but she expects a baby . . ."

"She could pose for the Madonna . . ."

"She is worthy of the comparison. There was never a purer soul than hers."

"Why should not exquisite delicacy dedicate itself to love?"

"The maréchal is too busy with other things. Men of his type should not marry."

Anne bent over a bud and smelled it. I caught a glimpse of the magnificent valley that separated her breasts. An irresistible impulse to grasp and crush them in my hands possessed me. I tightened my fists until my

nails cut into the flesh. Why should I tremble before the breasts of this woman? Was it merely youth and spring? Or was it because I could only see the valley that divided their loveliness?

Anne looked up. "Smell this bud, Prince. It is intoxicating, as if the whole of spring were encased in its tiny body."

I bent. My face almost touched hers. I breathed deeply, but not of the bud. I moved my head, until my lips met hers. I pressed into them. She did not withdraw. I lowered my face until it touched her breast. Anne uttered a stifled cry. She straightened up. I grasped her in my arms. "Anne," I whispered, "Anne, I love you." Her face was flushed. She breathed heavily, her eyes nearly shut.

I placed my arm around her waist and we walked in silence to a bench hidden among the bushes. She stretched out upon it. Her white gown and her immobility gave her the appearance of a statue.

"Anne," I whispered. "Anne." Her name thrilled me. My heart beat violently against my chest. "Anne." I covered her body with kisses.

29. THE LABORATORY OF GILLES DE RETZ —GILLES CHALLENGES GOD—THE SECRET LOVE OF GILLES DE RETZ—I BREAK THE MAGIC CIRCLE—THE WHITE WITCH JOAN OF ARC—I WITNESS A MIRACLE

THE MARECHAL invited me into his laboratory. He unlocked a door which led into a small room which resembled a monk's cell. Upon one of the walls was a crucifix, upside down; upon another, the signs of the Zodiac; and in a corner was a heap of dung over which large flies buzzed. The air was stifling as that of a stable.

"My Homunculus," he said proudly, "is prospering within it." He pointed to the heap of manure.

"How can man be born out of dung?"

"Why not? It is the womb of the earth. But heat and manure are not sufficient, Cartaphilus. That is true. For forty days I shall feed him on the arcanum of human blood. I have discovered the perfect combination. Maimonides failed because he could not obtain the pristine, virginal blood of children. I, Gilles de Retz, Maréchal de France, obtain from God or the Devil whatever is needed."

We walked out. I breathed deeply, many times.

"Cartaphilus, who are you?" the maréchal asked again suddenly.

"I am—he who seeks."

"Seeks what?"

"What the Lord de Retz seeks—a newer and more beautiful life. Only I seek more slowly. I wait."

"I am impatient, Cartaphilus. I cannot wait."

We reached the bench upon which Anne had stretched out in all her beauty. Gilles bade me sit. "Cartaphilus," he whispered, "you are he whom I have sought, he who understands, he who knows. Stay with me always. Be my brother. Let us take the blood bond between us. Call me Gilles." In the tower, a shadow moved from one window to another, slowly, ceaselessly. Gilles looked up. "It is Lady de Retz, Cartaphilus. She is very restless. Frequently, the whole night through, she walks as she does now."

"Perhaps she fears you, Gilles."

"She fears my beard." He laughed a little. "Everybody fears it. I know they call me Bluebeard when my back is turned. Perhaps my beard determines my life! Demosthenes became the greatest orator because he stammered. Cæsar became the most fearless of generals because he was an epileptic. The Maid Joan saved France—because she was not really a woman."

"Not really a woman?" I asked.

"She never paid the bloody sacrifice that nature exacts every month from woman. She was not a slave to the moon."

From his eyes darted the curious fire that bespoke the strangeness of his mind. He stroked his beard, and combed it with the tips of his delicate fingers, covered with jewels of fantastic designs.

"She was a witch—a white witch, but a witch, Cartaphilus! She confessed that she was," he exclaimed suddenly. "Afterwards she recanted and lied, but once I caught her performing magic rites. She made the spirits speak and obey." He covered his face with his hands and placed his elbows upon his knees. "I love Catherine, my wife. She's beautiful and charming, a delicate bud. But my heart seeks the boy-girl, the witch, Joan of Arc."

I sympathized with Gilles. His unhappiness resembled mine—Salome, though not dead like the Maid, was equally unattainable.

"She will be mine, Cartaphilus! I shall conquer death! I shall invoke her spirit and capture it. She was too proud to accept me in life. She must accept me in death. Francis Prelati, the greatest magus, will assist me. We have made our pact with the Prince of Darkness."

I determined to expose the charlatans who had deluded the maréchal and who devoured his substance.

The vault was hung round with black curtains. There was no light, save a torch fixed in a high candelabrum. A triangular tripod in the center was surmounted by a bowl out of which a thin smoke arose, filling the air with a strange odor. An altar of white marble, supported by four columns terminating in bulls' feet, stood at the left. It was surmounted by a cross, upside down, placed upon a serpent in the shape of a triangle.

Master Prelati was dressed in an ephod of white linen clasped with a single emerald; upon his breast the talisman of Venus hanging from a thread of azure silk. His assistant was dressed in a priestly robe of black bombazine. Gilles de Retz, handsome and defiant, was resplendent in his uniform of Maréchal de France.

The magus walked to the tripod and stirred the smoke with a fan of swan feathers. He motioned to us to approach, and described three circles, one within the other, with his long ebony staff.

"Remain within the circle. Never budge, no matter what you see or hear. He who breaks the circle breaks the bond that unites his body to his soul." Slowly he lifted his right fist, within which he held a bundle of fagots snatched from the flames. "Joan of Arc! Joan of Arc! Joan of Arc!" There was no answer.

"Joan, this wood has fed the flame that consumed your body. Your ashes dropped upon it and impregnated it. I am holding your body! Joan, I command you, in the All-powerful Name, to appear before us!"

There was a rumbling noise, like the roar of a lion which gradually increased and became a hideous mixture of sounds. The smoke in the tripod turned a thick black, and a sulphurous stench filled the place.

The smoke dispersed. The torch was blown out, and against one of the curtains appeared the shape of a young woman, white and trembling.

"Joan!" the maréchal called out. "Joan, you have come to me!" He started toward the apparition, but the magician's assistant restrained him.

"Joan, I may not come near to you. I may not touch the hem of your robe. Listen to me, Joan. I love you. I can love no other woman, Joan. You scorned me in the flesh—give me your love in the spirit!"

The apparition did not stir. Her lips tightened as if in defiance.

The maréchal grew indignant. He rose. "I command you to speak! I, Gilles, Lord of Retz, Maréchal of France!"

He drew his sword from its scabbard.

Fearing he would do himself some injury, I determined to put an end to the trick. Deliberately I walked out of the magic circles. Before the magician realized my intention, I was beyond the reach of his hocus-pocus.

The three men within the circle uttered a cry of horror. The roaring of the wild beasts commenced again, and out of the tripod rose a choking smoke. I continued my steps, undaunted. I had seen too many invocations of spirits. I knew that the apparition of Joan of Arc was merely a play of light and shade upon mirrors. I walked to the spot where, according to my calculation, the magic mirrors were hidden, and crashed them with my sword.

"Bunglers!" I exclaimed. "If you wish to invoke spirits, learn to improve your art."

The magicians rushed out of the vault, the maréchal following them with his bare sword.

"Gilles!" I called. "Do not pursue them."

He continued his pursuit of the tricksters.

Suddenly, against the white curtains, the spectral image of the Maid appeared. I had smashed the mirror but the apparition remained! I bent my neck forward and opened my eyes. The Maid lingered on . . .

"Joan," I called, my voice trembling with awe, "Joan, speak to me!"

Joan tightened her face in pain or abhorrence, made the sign of the cross and vanished, slowly, like a light that is carried away . . .

Had I labored under an illusion? Was this more than a trick? Had I left intact one mirror which now mothered the mirage of Joan, boy-maid, witch-woman and saint?

I drew the curtains aside. Every mirror was smashed!

Gilles returned.

"Cartaphilus," he said, placing his sword in its scabbard, "I am grateful to you beyond words, for more than all things else, I seek truth."

He grasped my arm. "Come—this place oppresses me."

But my thoughts still revolved around the pale wraith of the Maid.

By an irony of the fateful goddess, the maréchal had missed the only genuine miracle of the evening, inexplicable to me then as it is today.

30. SULLEN PEASANTS—THE NEEDS OF HOMUNCULUS—THE DREAM OF GILLES DE RETZ—KOTIKOKURA MAKES A DISCOVERY

I WALKED beyond the garden into the field. The peasants—men, women and children—were working feverishly. The scythes glittered ominously in the sun like scimitars, and the heavy pitchforks ripped into the hay like bayonets.

Two women, becoming aware of my presence, uttered a stifled cry, then crossed themselves. Others looked up from their labor, and glared and pointed at me in silence.

Why were the farmers so enraged against the maréchal and his guests?

I arrived at the gate that led to the left wing of the castle. A girl of about ten was knocking at it with her small fists. She looked at me, her eyes filled with tears.

"What is the trouble, my dear?"

"My little brother went inside a long while ago and he has not come out again."

I raised my hand to pat her, but she withdrew from me.

From within came a child's sharp cry—the cry of an animal that is pierced by a knife.

"It's my brother, monsieur, my brother!" the girl sobbed. "My brother! My brother!"

The gate opened and the maréchal emerged. His eyes

were wide open and bloodshot. His hands trembled. He breathed heavily.

"Ah! Here you are, my friend!" he exclaimed. His voice was husky.

The little girl screamed.

Gilles smiled. "They are all afraid of my beard—these little brats."

"My brother," she implored.

"Your brother? What about him?"

"He cried a while ago . . . I heard him."

"Foolish child," the maréchal said tenderly. "He is probably playing and laughing with the rest of the children. Would you not like to accompany them?"

"No, no!" she screamed.

"Oh, very well. Here, take this gold coin and tell your mother to buy you a beautiful dress."

Gilles looked after her. "A very pretty child," he said slowly. "Very pretty." He took my arm. From his mustache, a drop of blood trickled into his beard. I shivered.

He spoke quickly and enthusiastically about a book he had just read. I knew that he endeavored to make me forget the child. Gradually his eyes resumed their usual clarity. His lips lengthened into a smile. He looked like a boy again—a boy who has pasted onto his chin a blue beard to scare his comrades.

Suddenly, placing his hand upon my leg, he said: "Cartaphilus. I am happy today, for I have discovered the secret."

"What secret, Gilles?"

"My Homunculus lives!"

"Ah?"

"A few days ago, I paid him a visit. He stirred!"

I looked at him, incredulous.

"He stirred for a second, then remained still again. The virginal blood was not virginal enough. There is always some impurity, even in the youngest blood, once it has coursed through the body. What is needed is the blood of an unborn child snatched from the womb."

"What woman would be willing to consent to this sacrifice?"

"What difference does it make whether she is willing or not? We cannot allow truth to be sacrificed for a woman. We must be strong, Cartaphilus. We must, if needs be, trample on human sentiment and emotion."

He pulled the corners of his beard.

"Truth is beyond man and God . . . and Satan!" he continued. "Cartaphilus, I have observed your high Priest. There is something about him that symbolizes the earth. He is Pan—the reflection of the earth, which is the magnificent palace of him who rebelled against Adonai. I should like to have the high priest appear as Lucifer at the Black Mass which must precede the birth of Homunculus. I dare not address him for fear of tempting him to answer in violation of his vow. He understands you, however, by a mere look or gesture."

"Your hospitality is so generous that he will not refuse your wish."

He pressed my hand. "Brother."

"Does not the Black Mass mean, Maréchal, that you have decided to make final your covenant with Satan?"

He nodded. "There is no other way, Cartaphilus. One cannot serve two masters at once. Sooner or later, one must burn one's boats. Besides, with the high priest present, Satan himself will come to baptize his son."

Satan as godfather seemed so ludicrous that I could not refrain from laughing a little.

"And the godmother, Gilles? Who shall it be?"

"The godmother," he answered solemnly, "is the woman whose womb will deliver the base metal which will be transformed into gold."

He closed his eyes and breathed as quietly as a man asleep. One long white hair glistened among the blue of his beard. Was it the drop of blood which had changed its original color? How much pain was Gilles destined to inflict? How many children would shriek before he discovered the secret of life—or, more likely, the futility of his efforts? Was Homunculus a boon great enough to justify the murder of a child ripped from his mother's womb? Had not Yahweh discovered a simpler process to reproduce life? Had he not, also, perhaps, experimented for eons, to find at last nothing more beautiful, nothing more efficacious than the embrace of the male and the female?

Could I permit this monster to live? Yet Gilles de Retz was my intellectual kinsman. In his inhuman fashion, he loved me.

I sheathed the dagger that, for a moment, twitched in my hand.

Kotikokura pulled at my sleeve. "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!" His nostrils quivered and his teeth chattered. A dog that followed him was munching a large bone, tearing the shreds of flesh that clung to it.

"Look, Ca-ta-pha!" He pointed to the animal.

The bone was the arm of a child! I was seized with nausea.

"Ca-ta-pha—come!" He pulled my arm and preceded me. From time to time, he looked back to see if we were observed. He led me to a trap door hidden behind a rock. We descended several steps. An intolerable stench struck my nostrils like a fist.

"Look, Ca-ta-pha!"

When my eyes became accustomed to the dark, I saw strewn about piles of bones, skulls in which an eye still persisted to glare like a bit of porcelain, legs torn from their sockets, arms placed upon each other in the shape of crosses, flesh over which enormous flies buzzed and rats munched. In phials, blood coagulated like frozen cherries.

"How did you discover this, Kotikokura?"

He told me how for days he had been smelling something strange; how the dogs, their muzzles to the earth, discovered the rock. His curiosity was greater than his prudence. He opened the door and discovered the holocaust of children.

"We have seen much death and we are not pure-handed ourselves, Kotikokura—but have you ever seen such a loathsome thing?"

He shook his head vigorously.

"During the Crusades, we splashed through blood, but the deeds of the followers of Christ never were half so monstrous as the work of antichrist!"

I rubbed my heart as if to remove all traces of the hand that had been placed upon it in sign of friendship and allegiance. This must stop! No friendship could survive this! No promise could bind!

31. THE LOVE OF ANNE—I BETRAY A FRIEND

ANNE entered—an exquisite phantom in white.

"Catherine is happy today."

"Happy?"

"She has felt life! She says that never—not even when Gilles thrilled her with his first kiss—did she experience such joy. Besides, my brother-in-law told her that he would show her his laboratory, initiate her into his great secret—and ever after she would have nothing to fear."

I stood up with a jerk.

"He would show her the true meaning of life and birth."

"Anne!" I exclaimed, "don't let her go to him! Never, do you hear? She must not."

"What is the matter, dear?"

No friendship could endure this! No brother could be forgiven for such a crime! It was Catherine, then—the beautiful, the exquisite Catherine, whom he meant to sacrifice to his insane illusion. When it was an abstract idea, woman in general, I could tolerate it—but Catherine whose face was like spring and whose body like a young tree!

"It shall not take place!" I shouted.

"What is the trouble, Cartaphilus? I beg you to tell me!"

I related to Anne the maréchal's insane obsession, omitting, however, the gruesome things I had witnessed.

She buried her head into the pillow and sobbed, "Poor Catherine! Poor Catherine! Cartaphilus, can you imagine what she has been suffering? She pretends to believe nothing—the rumors, the cries, the complaints of mothers. Even the strange lights and shadows at midnight did not convince her. 'Gossip, sister,' she says, trembling the while. I am sure she will not, or pretend not, to believe what you have told me, Cartaphilus. Even if she saw the glittering knife in his fiendish hands, she would continue to love and trust him. She may even allow herself to be sacrificed."

"We must not let her, Anne! She is too beautiful."

"The monster! The monster!" She knelt before the painting of the Holy Virgin that hung upon the wall. "Holy Mother, help us save my sister from the clutches of the fiend! Mother Mary, help us save her unborn. Mother of us all, protect us! Amen!"

She rose and seated herself next to me. "Cartaphilus, what shall we do?"

"You have spoken to me of your brothers, Anne. Can we not implore their help?"

"They are strong and courageous. They would do anything for Catherine, but he will not permit them to enter his castle."

"So great a castle must have some secret gate."

She knit her brow; then she placed her mouth to my ear, as if fearing that someone were eavesdropping. "There is a gate, dilapidated and hidden by bushes to the left of the field. One man can pass through it at a time. No one watches it."

"Have you a trusted servant who could carry our message to your brothers?"

"I think so, Cartaphilus. A young man who is in love with Madeleine, my chambermaid. He would go into the fires of hell for her and she would do as much for me."

"Send him; but one messenger is not enough. Something may happen to him on the way. He may miscarry our orders."

"I have a carrier pigeon, Cartaphilus—a most beautiful and intelligent bird. My mother gave us several at our departure. The monster permitted the birds to escape. One returned. He can carry a message under his wings."

"Splendid!"

She pressed my hands, her eyes filled with tears. "Cartaphilus, the Lord Jesus has sent you to us."

He will always get the credit, I thought. I said, "Promise me one thing, Anne."

"Yes, Cartaphilus. Anything."

"Gilles must not be subjected to torture. He must not be abandoned to the rabble which, houndlike, tears its victims to pieces."

"The Church can deal with her erring children, Cartaphilus," she added. "You will recognize her beneficence and her wisdom if you accept baptism! Let my love persuade you."

I seated her upon my knee and caressed her. She sobbed lightly. I laid her gently upon the bed. She offered her treasures as gracefully and as beautifully as flowers open their petals. At dawn, she left the bed. Shivering a little from the morning chill, she returned once more.

"Love me again, Cartaphilus. I have a premonition that this is our last embrace. How shall I live without you, Cartaphilus? How can another man's embrace delight me after this?"

"One forgets."

"Man forgets—but not woman. Not Anne."

The sun made a lake of gold upon the bed.

"Kotikokura, you play the Devil."

He grinned.

"Play your part well, but above all keep the mask I gave you."

He touched his belt.

"If the brothers do not come and if I cannot dissuade him from slaughtering his lovely wife, I shall throw the powder into the air. One breath of it will paralyze all except those wearing the masks. We can then carry the victim away and escape. Remember the sign, Kotikokura. Put your mask on and I shall do likewise, or else we shall suffer the general fate."

Kotikokura nodded.

"Meanwhile, cause no suspicion. Obey whatever the maréchal commands."

32. WHITE MASS—BLACK MASS—BLACK PRAYER—RITES OF SATAN—BEAST OR GOD—THE SACRIFICE—THE BAPTISM OF HOMUNCULUS—JUDAS

THE PEOPLE entered, dipping their fingers into the holy water, and bending their knees before the altar. Those of rank seated themselves in the front pews, the peasants in the rear. A box in the manner of the theaters was reserved for the maréchal and his guests of honor.

The chapel was like an enormous jewel, carved and chiseled into the shape of a room. The altar was of gold and lapis lazuli, the pillars of red-veined marble. The walls and ceiling were frescoed with magnificent paintings.

The organ played and an invisible choir chanted a beautiful litany. The bishop, accompanied by two priests, entered slowly. The canopy which covered them was of white silk embroidered with gold. The bishop held in his hand a crucifix—a mass of precious stones. Six young boys, dressed in black velvet, scattered incense from censers of jade.

The bishop mounted the steps of the altar and knelt. He rose and with his back to the worshipers chanted short verses, at the end of which he shook a tiny gold bell. The people responded: *"Ora pro nobis. Ora pro nobis."* The organ played a melody so low, it floated about the place like the vague perfume of a god.

The maréchal and Catherine knelt, pressing their heads

against the balustrade of the box. Anne closed her eyes. Her hand clasped mine tightly.

"They have not come, Cartaphilus," she whispered.

"Do not fear, Anne."

She knelt and in kneeling, kissed my hand.

The bishop uncovered the ciborium. The worshipers approached one by one, in silence, took a tiny wafer—the body of Jesus—and bending their knee, left.

The music ceased. The priests removed the ciborium and the bell.

The maréchal rose and whispered into Catherine's ear. She rose also and bowing, said: "Whatever my lord desires."

He kissed her forehead and descended to speak with the bishop.

"Do not go, sister!" Anne implored. "Do not go!"

Catherine looked at her reproachfully. "Anne, is he not my husband? Should not a wife obey her husband?"

"He is a—"

I pressed her arm. Anne stopped short.

"Catherine, in the name of our Lord Jesus, do not go today."

"Anne, shall I be false to my vow?"

"He is false to his."

"Do not speak thus, sister."

The maréchal took my arm and bade me descend the steps. "Contrasts thrill me, Cartaphilus. To go immediately from the worship of Adonai into the Temple of Lucifer, from the White Mass to the Black Mass, to pray fervently in both places!"

From the middle of the ceiling hung a large candelabrum whose shape was a phallic caricature of the one in the Temple of Solomon and which spread a yellowish light, resembling the pallor of a jaundiced eye.

The walls were painted with grotesque figures—goats with the heads of men, bulls with bodies of goats, elephants whose trunks and legs suggested colossal organs of procreation, snakes, stallions, bats revolving about naked figures that were partially women and partially beasts.

In the center of the temple glowered a large marble statue of Pan: a giant priapus protruding from his belly, like a strangely shaped arrow hurled by an insane hunter.

The altar, marble encrusted with gold and jewels, was partially surrounded by a velvet curtain of a deep scarlet embroidered with the triangle of Astarte.

The worshipers were assembled. Their faces were painted with phallic symbols or covered with masks of animals.

The maréchal's face acquired a beatitude which was incongruous with his eyes, wide open as an owl's in the dark and as ominous. His beard glittered.

The organ played a strange hymn, a commingling of solemn notes and a dancing medley. A hooded person, whose sex was difficult to determine, shook a censer, scattering an incense which resembled a decayed perfume mixed with human excretions.

Gilles de Retz invited me to sit with him.

"We need not take part in the common prayers. For us is reserved the great moment." He looked at me triumphantly, his gray eyes assuming their demoniac glitter.

I waited for a sign from Catherine's brothers, but I heard no sound. While I trusted my magic powder, I did not desire to display my power. I was already too conspicuous as the friend of Bluebeard. I did not wish to be compelled to explain the scientific device which produced a gas that paralyzed every muscle.

The priest entered, gorgeously attired. Upon his chest he wore upside down, an immense crucifix, studded with many diamonds which glittered like lamps.

He knelt before the altar and chanted. "Our Father which art in Hell, hallowed be Thy Name."

The worshipers responded: "Amen."

"Thy kingdom come."

"Amen."

"Thy Will be done on Earth as in Hell."

"Amen."

"Bring us this day our daily light."

"Amen."

"Lead us into temptation."

"Amen."

"That we may be free from desire."

"Amen."

"Deliver us from good."

"Amen."

"Which maketh men weak."

"Amen."

"Which bringeth pain and falsehood into the world."

"Amen."

"For Thine is the Kingdom and power and glory forever."

"Amen."

The priest uncovered the ciborium. The worshipers approached, one by one, forming a circle.

"Partake of the body of the enemy," the priest repeated at intervals. Each person took a wafer, desecrated it, and cast it upon the floor.

"Partake of the body of the enemy."

Was it a bugle in the distance or the triumphant note of the organ? I listened, my eyes wide open.

There was perfect silence again.

The circle of worshipers was completed. A black-draped acolyte filled the large cup which each one drank and turned upside down to prove that nothing had remained within it.

"Drink the sacred blood of our Lord Lucifer," the priests chanted.

Three times the circle turned. Three times they drank the full cup. Their legs became unsteady and their eyes glistened. Many laughed.

The organ played *Gloria in Excelsis* backward.

The worshipers began to dance about Pan, swaying, contortioning, moaning, howling.

I became more and more impatient. Would Kotikokura remember the sign? Would he have the mask with him? I touched my cloak. Mine was safely hidden.

The worshipers danced on. Their clothing hung from their bodies. Their mouths were covered with foam, like galloping horses.

A stench which was more than mortal struck my nostrils. Human excreta mingled with a strange odor that seemed to be a permanent exhalation of Lucifer's temple. Was this the ultimate corruption? Was it the stench of second death?

The choir sang a beautiful litany in a minor key. The dance degenerated into obscene gestures. The worshipers tore their clothing, exhibiting their nakedness. Some inflicted wounds upon themselves with tiny spears and knives. They screamed, whether in pleasure or pain, I could not tell.

"How is the worship of Satan superior to that of Jesus?" I asked.

The maréchal looked at me, one eyebrow lifted. "By releasing the beast we discover the god," he said mysteriously.

Once more I heard a noise that seemed the call of a distant bugle. I rose and bent my head in the direction. The maréchal looked at me intently. Had he heard it also?

"Tomorrow," he said, "these men and women will walk the earth free. Freed from passion, they will see the true light."

"All religions speak of the true light. Meanwhile, man gropes in the dark . . ."

The priests struck a cauldron seven times, with a staff in the shape of a pitchfork. A sulphurous vapor jetted out and darkened the temple for a few moments.

"He is with us," the priest announced.

"He is with us," the people responded.

"He who has conquered Adonai."

"He who has conquered Adonai."

"Lucifer, the Light-bearer."

"Lucifer, the Light-bearer."

The maréchal took my arm and bade me approach the altar.

The priest blew a silver horn three times to the east, to the west, to the north and to the south. The curtain was drawn aside. Upon the altar, Kotikokura stood disguised as the Prince of Darkness. From his temples rose two tall horns, priapic shaped. About his chest was a breastplate of gold, studded with one large ruby. His feet were encased in black hoofs, his hands in black gauntlets which shone with tiny jewels. In his right fist, he held an ebony staff, terminating in two gold prongs.

The worshipers threw themselves upon their faces. The priest knelt. "Blessed be the Lord of Life."

"Amen!" the people responded.

"May His Kingdom come."

"Amen."

The organ played. The maréchal approached the altar and knelt. "Has the great moment arrived, O Prince of Light?"

Kotikokura nodded. Two long streams of smoke curled out of his nostrils.

The maréchal rose. "Bring in the sacrifice!" he commanded.

I listened intently. It seemed to me I heard the hoofs of horses, but they might be merely the maréchal's own men passing by. I looked at Kotikokura. His hearing was more acute than mine, but he did not seem to hear anything. Perhaps they had already arrived, but planned to enter noiselessly, to avert useless slaughter.

Catherine, veiled in black, entered, preceded by the priest.

"Woman, rejoice, for the Lord of Light has chosen you to bring truth into the world!"

The priests began disrobing Catherine, exposing the delicate curves of her motherhood to the gaze of the Satanists. She recoiled.

"Woman, do not hinder us!"

Catherine looked at Gilles, her eyes dimmed with tears. Her chest heaved a little, as if stifling a sob. Her lips moved. I knew she endeavored to pronounce his name.

But Gilles did not hear. His face looked like the ruin of some magnificent castle.

I made a sign to Kotikokura. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

Catherine bent her head upon her chest, as if to cover her lovely nakedness. She was stretched out upon a bench. The priest brought a gold basin and a long knife whose edge was sharpened to the thinness of a hair.

"Bring in the Child of Reason!" Gilles ordered.

The priest pushed forcibly the wall on the left which opened like a door. Now I understood the true geography of the place. The temple was adjacent to the cellar where I had seen the corpses of the children.

Meanwhile, the person whose sex was difficult to determine and who had scattered the strange incense, helped the maréchal cover his head with a tallith upon which were embroidered formulæ from the Kabala, and wound seven times about his waist a red girdle.

Would help come too late? Even if the hoofbeats that I now distinctly heard were those of our horsemen, it was doubtful whether they could reach us in time.

The priest brought a large glass jar in which a strange creature lay huddled together—something that resembled a human fœtus or the embryo of a monkey.

Was this the Child of Reason? I had long discovered

that reason could not rule the universe, but I had never suspected the misshapen form of her progeny!

The maréchal raised the knife and made an inverted cross upon his chest. The reflection glittered upon Catherine's face.

The hoofbeats approached. If I could only delay the madman a little longer!

"Gilles," I whispered, "the cross must be made three times or the result is frustrated."

He looked at me. His eyes were aflame.

"Gilles!" I said.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Do not delay me now!"

It was no longer Gilles who spoke. His voice was raucous and strained.

He touched Catherine's body with the point of the knife. One moment more, and it would have been too late!

I grasped his hand and threw the knife to the floor. Suddenly trumpets resounded and doors were broken in from all sides.

Gilles stared at me. "Judas!" he shouted.

He was surrounded by soldiers. Two soldiers grasped the maréchal's arm.

"I am Gilles de Retz, Maréchal of France."

"You are the Devil! You shall burn in your own hellfire!" one of the brothers shouted, hewing his way to the altar.

Catherine jumped up, covered herself with a black veil, and kneeling before her brother, she sobbed.

"Spare him. He knew not what he was doing."

I motioned to Kotikokura. In the fracas that ensued, we made our escape.

33. THE CITY OF FLOWERS—THE ADVENTURE OF TWO YOUTHS

Flowers hanging over the tall stone and iron fences; flowers at the windows; flowers in the hair of women, between the lips of merchants selling fish or fruit in the narrow tortuous streets; flowers over the ears of little boys and girls playing in the yards; flowers around the necks of donkeys and horses; flowers sailing over the yellowish waters of the Arno—a carnival of flowers, an orgy of perfume!

"What an appropriate name for the city, Kotikokura. Fiorenze—Florence, the City of Flowers."

Wagons began to rumble and horses and donkeys and oxen to trot, each producing a different and peculiar harmony. The wagons were bedecked with flowers and ribbons, and filled with tiny cages of all materials—wood, iron, tin, porcelain. Within each cage, a grasshopper, still and motionless, and a small leaf of cabbage or lettuce.

Innkeepers raised the iron shutters of their shops and placed tables and chairs on the sidewalks, shouting all the time to the merchants not to crowd too near their doors.

People were coming from all directions, singing, laughing, imitating the music of grasshoppers. The sellers shouted the names of their wares, embellished by delectable adjectives, at the tops of their voices.

Two youths, dressed in green cloaks, were walking in front of us, arm in arm. Their caps, surmounted by red plumes, were slightly tilted. Their black curls, barely covering their napes, were ruffled by a light wind that had just risen. Kotikokura, a little unsteady, was hanging on to my arm.

"Do not these youths remind you of exquisite music? I fear to see their faces. I do not want to be disappointed. . ."

Three men, slightly unsteady on their feet, turned the corner, and approached the youths. The latter tried to avoid the encounter, but the men stopped them.

"You shan't go any farther, my little chicks," one of them shouted. The others laughed.

"You will come along with us."

"Stand aside!" one of the youths commanded. "Let us pass."

The men looked at him from head to foot, and laughed.

"Just look at him! Why, my little midget, I can swallow you at a gulp," one man, tall, muscular, and heavy-bearded, shouted gaily.

"It's a girl," another said.

"They are both girls . . . can't you see?" the third one added, scrutinizing their faces.

"It is fortunate for you that we have left our swords at home . . . or we should give you proof of our manhood!"

"There are other ways of determining that problem," one of the three remarked with an obscene leer.

"They are boys!" the first of the three exclaimed.

"It does not matter what you are, my little ones. Come with us!"

"Take your foul hands away! Stand aside; let us pass or tomorrow your bodies shall swing from the gibbet," exclaimed one of the two, his voice raised in a boyish treble.

"Ha, ha! The fellow has courage," cried the bearded roysterer, clumsily embracing the child.

"Tomorrow takes care of itself. When we come across delicious fruit, we pluck it," shouted the second, a red-faced youth with Spanish mustachios.

"And we pluck it tonight," added the tallest of the three, a dark, clean-shaven villain.

A little hand descended upon his cheek with enough

force to make him hear the angels sing. Fury and desire outstripped his pain. He seized the combative little figure.

The other two men grasped the second youth by the arms and pulled him into the thicket.

I approached. "Why do you molest these young people?"

"Mind your own business!"

The youths looked at me. Their faces were almost exactly alike and of singular beauty.

"I shall not interfere with you, if you will not interfere with them."

"Stand off or—"

One of them placed his hand upon the hilt of his knife. Kotikokura, who was standing in back of me, jumped at his throat.

The others drew their swords. Kotikokura loosened his grip on the first one, who coughed violently, then struck the second roysterer a blow over the face which upset him. I gripped the third, and with one delicate twist which I had learned in the East, dislocated his arm. His sword dropped and he bent in two, howling with pain.

"These drunken ruffians will no longer annoy you," I said to the youths, who were holding each other's arms, trembling.

"We are grateful to you, signore," one of them answered manfully.

"May we accompany you to where you desire to go, seeing that it is not safe for two young people like you to be out on such a night unaccompanied and unarmed?"

"We are going home, and if you will be good enough to accompany us, we shall be beholden to you."

We stopped at the gate of a palace situated near the Duomo.

"It is here that we live, signore," one of the youths informed me. "Should you care to come in, our uncle will be delighted to make your acquaintance and thank you for your chivalrous aid."

I made a few evasive excuses.

"Do come!" he insisted.

"Are you certain that you are not inviting—the Devil and his—valet?"

They laughed.

We accepted.

34. ANTONIO AND ANTONIA—BOY OR GIRL —I BLUSH—I TELL A STORY—BEAUTY IS A FLAME—TWO RINGS FOR ONE

Baron di Martini, a distant relative of the prince—or if the rumor was true, a half-brother—greeted us cordially.

"Can you imagine, signore, two young scatterbrains going about the city unattended? I did not know about it until half an hour ago, and I have just sent some servants in search of them. I am really grateful to you, signore, for having saved them from much unpleasantness."

A lackey removed the cloaks of the youths. One of them embraced the baron.

"What!" he exclaimed, "dressed as a boy, Antonia? What does this mean?"

"It is la Festa del Grillo, uncle! Summer! On such a day surely I may have a fling at life . . ."

The baron laughed.

How had I been so unobservant? The handsome youth was a girl! The scoundrels that accosted them suspected aright. Nevertheless, there was in the slim, graceful figure, a touch of something that justified the boyish mummery.

"Uncle," said the other, "we have invited these gentlemen to be our guests."

"Splendid, Antonio," the uncle remarked.

Antonio, slim and impetuous, was evidently a boy. However, it imposed no strain upon the imagination to regard him as a girl in disguise. Without being effeminate he still had that first bloom of childhood, which is either sexless or epicene.

"Is it proper really," I asked, "to intrude upon you in this fashion?"

"I insist, signore, you must be my guests," the Baron replied.

"I asked the young gentlemen—or as I notice now—the signore and the signorina, whether they were quite certain they were not inviting most sinister characters."

"Sinister characters!" the uncle laughed. "I do not think a gentleman can ever disguise himself."

I promised to stay overnight.

Baron di Martini showed me the garden and orchard which surrounded the castle. Kotikokura walked behind us between two large dogs, black as charcoal.

Antonio and Antonia advanced toward us.

"How delicate is youth!" I said.

"Nothing," the Baron added, "surpasses the loveliness of spring. I wish I could keep them from growing older! Before long I shall lose them. Each will go and lose himself in the labyrinth of love and life. . . ."

"Worse still, perhaps . . . they will lose each other!"

Antonia and Antonio raced toward us. Each offered me a rose. The boy's rose was white, hers red. My face flushed. I was a little embarrassed, a pleasurable sensation.

"You are too kind," I said, at loss for words.

"Without you, Count, we might be dead . . ." Antonia remarked archly.

"You exaggerate your peril."

"No, no, Count," the baron interposed. "You do not know the Florentines. Art and crime both flourish within our walls."

"Count," said the girl, "you must know many stories. . . ."

"Tell us one," said the boy.

"A story!" the girl repeated.

"They still are children," the baron remarked, "even if they pretend to be grown up."

Kotikokura ran, the dogs after him, barking lustily.

"It is strange, Count—those two dogs, ordinarily ferocious toward strangers, have become from the first moment inseparable companions of your man."

"He is a lover of animals, Baron, and animals, no doubt, scent his affection at once."

Antonio and Antonia on either side of me, we walked slowly through the garden. The delicate pressure of their arms—one barely heavier than the other—delighted me. It was like the warm pulsation of the heart of a bird.

The baron, summoned by the prince on business of state, apologized for his absence and asked the scatterbrains—as he was pleased to call the children whenever he was most affectionate—to entertain me.

We were sitting in a corner of the enormous reception hall, whose walls had been frescoed by the old masters of Florence, Antonio on my right, Antonia on my left. Kotikokura sat opposite us, a dog on either side of him.

I raised the chin of Antonio with my forefinger, then that of Antonia, and looked into their eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked.

They smiled.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

"We are Toni," Antonia answered.

"Both Toni?"

They nodded.

"Are you one or two?"

"We are one and two."

"Where did I meet you before?"

"You met me . . . far, far away," said Antonia, speaking like a child who is telling a fairy tale.

"And me still farther," added Antonio with boyish eagerness.

"He always tries to outdo me, Count. It is the vanity of the male. . ."

"Silence, woman!" the boy commanded. "Man is the master."

"No!" she exclaimed.

"Woman must remain the inferior of man—always," the boy insisted.

"Toni!" she exclaimed. "How can you say that?"

"Except you, my dear. But you are not a woman."

"Well, I shall be one."

"Never!"

"Yes . . . and I shall be the queen of a great nation where women rule over men.

"Do you not think that woman is the equal of man, Count?" Antonia asked.

"Some women are the equal of goddesses."

"See?"

"Then some men are the equal of gods, Count."

"They are."

"And is not a god greater than a goddess?"

"Sex distinctions are not important among the gods. . ."

"See, Toni? But, Count, tell us the story you promised!"

They pulled their chairs nearer to me.

"Ready!" they both exclaimed.

"Once upon a time, there were two children—a boy and a girl—"

"No, no, Count."

"We are no longer children."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Some of the things I shall tell, you may not understand."

They laughed.

"Count," Antonio whispered, "we have read Aretino and Boccaccio."

Antonia blushed a little and nodded.

"What!" I exclaimed in mock reproof.

For a moment, they were nonplussed but, catching a faint smile about my lips, they burst into laughter. Each placed an arm upon my shoulders, and their voices mingling into one, said: "You cannot deceive us, Count. You too believe that the beautiful is the good. Uncle sometimes tries to appear severe on moral questions. Dear uncle—he considers himself responsible for our welfare. But you are like an older brother. You can afford to be candid with us. . . ."

"You are right, little sister and brother."

"Don't call us little," Antonia reprimanded me. "Call us sister and brother."

I placed my arms about their waists. "Brother and sister, you are supremely good, because you are supremely beautiful . . . and as long as you will be beautiful, you will be good. Ugliness is the only sin. . . ."

"Tediousness is the only evil," Antonia added sagely.

I related divers experiences. By merely calling the centuries years and the years months, I discovered that, after all, one could squeeze upon a tiny canvas what had been spread leisurely upon an enormous wall. Although I used various names to hide my identity, they knew perfectly well that I was telling my own experiences.

Salome and Ulrica intrigued Antonia, Flower-of-the-Evening and Damis fascinated Antonio. They asked questions, apparently very innocently and merely for the sake of elucidation, but in reality they showed that uncanny prescience of sex which sometimes startles us in the very young.

I thought of the white rose, symbol of purity, whose perfume and pollen are but sexual allurement to entice the bee and the butterfly. Under the petal of their youth, the children's senses were stirred, and the perfume of their desire was wafted to me.

They snuggled against me. Suddenly, Antonia stood up. "Why, my dear, the Count must be thirsty and hungry too."

Antonio clapped his hands. "Why, of course! You will never be a woman, sister. You will never think of important trifles."

She smiled. Was her smile irony? Was it wisdom? Was it pity? Was she a daughter of the Sphinx?

A servant entered. Antonia ordered wine and cakes and fruits in such abundance that I burst out laughing.

"You overestimate my capacity."

Antonia filled our cups. We drank to beauty, which is truth, and to truth, which is beauty.

"Oh" she exclaimed suddenly, "we have forgotten him." She pointed to Kotikokura who was smiling, his eyes half-closed. "He is such a queer and dear fellow," she whispered.

She filled a cup for him and brought him some cakes and fruit.

I told them anecdotes about Africa and India. Cheered by the wine, they laughed uproariously.

"What a strange ring you have, Count. Is it from India?"

"No, Toni—this ring belonged to one of Mohammed's nephews . . . it brings good luck to its wearer."

"Has it brought good luck to you?"

"I have had the good fortune of meeting you."

"It is rather the other way, then, Count. He who wears it brings good luck to those with whom he comes in contact."

"Do you really think it beautiful?"

"Very."

"Well, then, I shall have it cut and made into two rings, and if you will allow me, I shall present each of you with one, so that you may always have good luck or bring good luck to others."

"Oh, Count, you are too good to us, really!" they exclaimed.

"We shall remember you—always," Antonio said.

"Whenever we are unaccountably happy, we shall think of you." Antonia added.

"Will you think of us, too?" the boy asked.

"I shall think of you—long after you have forgotten me."

"Count, would you like to see the rings our mother gave us before she died?"

"Oh, yes, Toni, bring the little box."

Antonio went out. Antonia placed her small hand in mine and leaned her head against my shoulder.

"Count . . . who are you?"

I was startled.

"Who are you?"

I kissed her dark tresses gently, and equally gently removed my hand from hers. This bud was too tender, too beautiful, to be plucked.

Antonio returned. He opened a small gold box, with two rings livid with exquisite rubies. Centuries of mystery and of passion seemed to slumber in the depths of the stones.

"How beautiful!" I exclaimed.

"Mother told us to wear them when we are happy. Shall we not wear them tonight, brother?" And the two rings blazed on the hands of the children, flaming like rose leaves, scarlet as drops of blood.

Kotikokura snored, his head resting upon one of the dogs, their shadows mingling and forming a bulky elephant whose trunk made a semicircle.

We talked, intoxicated by something that was not wine. At last nature demanded her toll. The sandman strewed his ware into the golden eyes of the two children. Antonio yawned. Antonia blinked.

"It is time to retire," I said.

They were reluctant, but finally yielded.

At the door, Antonia threw me a kiss. Antonio raised his hand halfway, checked himself, and blushed.

I was about to draw the curtains of my bed, when I heard footsteps, hardly heavier than those of a cat, approach. I strained my eyes, but I could see nothing. The hall was very long, and I had time to conjecture.

A soft-tipped finger pressed against my lips. "Sh. . . ." I moved slowly toward the wall. The bed hardly felt the weight of her. She pressed her lips on mine. My hands were many mouths, drinking nectar. A long kiss. A pressure of breast against breast, a mingling of lips, a moan. . . .

Like some white weightless feather which a zephyr wafts about a garden, she rose and disappeared in the blackness of the room.

Thoughts like many-colored confetti fell softly upon my brain, making beautiful patterns which bore no names.

Suddenly, I heard the soft footsteps again. Was she returning? Did her lips ache for another kiss? Again the pressure of a finger against my lips. "Sh . . ." Again a kiss, tender and impetuous. Did my hands deceive me? Was not beauty a flame? Was not joy a slow swooning?

I awoke. I rubbed my eyes and forehead trying to remember something—something incredibly beautiful and delicious. What was it? Was it a dream? I felt a pressure against my thigh. The ruby—a frozen drop of flame—on the head of the serpent.

"Antonia," I whispered.

I placed the ring upon my small finger. It fitted perfectly. I rose. Something fell to the floor.

"The other ring! Antonio?" I placed the ring on top of the other. They melted into one.

Who are you?
We are Toni.
Both Toni?
Yes.
Are you one or two?
We are one and two.
Both one?
Yes.

How incredibly beautiful!

The Double Blossom of Passion—the almost impossible loveliness of John and Mary in one!

A courier arrived with a letter from Baron di Martini. Affairs of state compelled him to prolong his absence for a few weeks. Unfortunately, the presence of the "scatterbrains" was also essential. Meanwhile, he would consider it a special favor if I remained his guest.

"Are the children gone?" I asked.

"Yes, Count. Early this morning, a messenger from the Duke came to fetch them."

"Kotikokura, we must go."

He sighed. His eye caught my hand. He grinned. I felt a little uneasy.

"It is the gift of the children."

Then, discreetly as ever, Kotikokura made preparations for our departure.

"Before I go I must see a goldsmith who will make two rings of this one—one for Antonio and one for Antonia. Alas, Kotikokura, we shall never see the children again—as least, never as they were last night . . . never. Ah, the perfect hour of youth is more frail than the outer rim of the moon when the dawn kisses her lips!"

35. MAN A RHEUMATIC TORTOISE—I TAKE STOCK OF MYSELF—I BRING THE HOLY GRAIL TO ALEXANDER VI—I DISCUSS THEOLOGY WITH THE POPE—THE HOLY FATHER AND HIS UNHOLY FAMILY—I AM TALKATIVE—ALEXANDER ASKS A QUESTION—TRAPPED

KOTIKOKURA and I walked along the shore of the Tiber which, heavy with recent rain, moved ponderously, like a man newly enriched. Lonesomeness made me shiver with a sudden chill. I took Kotikokura's arm and felt comforted a little. Strange that this queer being was my only companion.

Fourteen centuries! What profound change had occurred in me? I remained bewildered among my thoughts. I had learned divers magics, sciences, languages and philosophies. I had witnessed the rise and fall of emperors and civilizations. I had seen the colossal growth of Christianity—its physical power and its spiritual weakness. I had learned the meaning of history and the meaning of legend, and how truth and fiction mingled irrevocably together. I had experienced innumerable shades of love from grossest sensuality to a touch so vague that it would hardly graze the tip of a butterfly's wing. Beggar, saint, prince, monk, god and devil, I had lived a thousand lives.

What new paths had I discovered? How was I different from Cartaphilus, the young captain in the Roman army of occupation in Jerusalem at the time when the young Jewish carpenter was condemned to die on the cross? Under changing masks I remained myself. In spite of all, I was still Cartaphilus!

What, then, was the purpose of traversing so long a

road? Would sixty or seventy years have sufficed? Was everything relative in a world that would not or could not remain still for a fraction of a second?

Yes, that was my discovery: things only seemed, there was neither truth nor lie, neither good nor evil, neither God nor Devil.

Progress? There was no progress. For every step forward humanity takes one step back. Man hurls his ideas far ahead of him, like golden discs, but he himself crawls onward like a rheumatic tortoise.

His Holiness Alexander VI was financially embarrassed. The money received from the sale of indulgences fell far below expectations. Italy was overtaxed. Beyond the Alps, the people groaned and grumbled. Still, he had made a vow to finish the inner buildings of the Vatican during his lifetime.

Rome felt the tension of her master.

Alexander intrigued me. He wore his sins—incest, sodomy, murder—gracefully like a cloak. His extraordinary political sagacity, his love for the arts, were woven into the pattern. I was anxious to meet the vicar of Christ and Priapus!

"Kotikokura, having gathered fame, let us profit thereby. The great-grandson of Count de Cartaphile shall profit by the exploits of his ancestor."

The Pope's study overlooked his gardens. His Holiness was sitting at a long table whose massive legs were carved in the shape of young bulls, the coat of arms of the Borgias. A large copy of the Decameron, illuminated and encrusted, occupied the center of the table. His Holiness was dressed in white from head to foot. There was devouring curiosity in his eyes, but also irony played like lightning about his lips and chin, and his large wide forehead radiated intelligence.

I knelt. He made the sign of the cross over me and bade me rise.

"Are you indeed the great-grandson of Count de Cartaphile?"

"I am, Your Holiness. I have brought with me the Holy Grail, the cup out of which our Saviour drank at the Last Supper. My ancestor kept it hidden in a secret vault, which no one could unlock save he who lived a life that

was truly Christlike. Seven years, Holy Father, I spent in prayer and fasting. One morning, the vault miraculously opened by itself. The glory of it made me swoon. When I regained consciousness, the Holy Cup, filled to the brim with red wine, was in my hand. I drank it, and my body which had been emaciated from starvation, suddenly felt lithe and powerful as a youth's."

Alexander continued to smile enigmatically. "It is well to live a Christian life, and the rewards are many and great. May I see the Holy Grail, Count?"

The cup was a fine piece of Eastern workmanship—jade studded with emeralds. The Pope fondled it in his plump hands. He closed his eyes. I could not help thinking that he touched the cup as a man touches a woman's breast.

"It is indeed beautiful, Count, and he who made it was an artist."

"Your Holiness, the Holy Grail is not only beautiful. It possesses miraculous power. Anyone drinking a drop of wine out of it, or merely touching it with his lips, regains youth and strength."

The Pope raised the cup to his lips.

"Provided," I continued, "his life be as pure and undefiled as a child's."

"Of course," he smiled, replacing the cup upon the table.

"Holy Father, it would be selfish for me to keep so precious a thing. It belongs to all Christendom."

The Pope meditated, one palm upon the table, the other upon his leg.

"How can the religion of our Lord Jesus flourish unless all believers pay Peter's pence to Saint Peter? Holy Father, if the world hears of the cup which works miracles, sacrifices will roll like a flood into the Papal exchequer."

The Pope stood up. His weight did not diminish his stature. He was taller than Nero, but shorter than Charlemagne. He walked over to the window, breathed deeply, caressed his robe.

"Count, are you the only one who knows of the story of the Holy Grail?"

"Yes, Your Holiness, but by this time, Rome certainly knows of my existence. Rome and the world will listen to my tale."

"How so?"

"For three days, Your Holiness, clad in this armor, I rode through the city upon a white charger. The people are much intrigued. If it becomes known that a descendant of Count de Cartaphile has come to the Eternal City to bring to the Father of Christendom the Lord's Cup at the Last Supper, the four corners of the earth will reverberate with thanksgiving."

He interrupted me. "And what reward do you expect, Count?"

"Your blessing, Holy Father, is the only reward I crave."

"You make yourself suspicious, my son."

"Suspicious?"

"You ride through the city on a white charger, dressed in armor. You bring me a precious cup of splendid oriental workmanship. You insist upon its miraculous power. No, it can hardly be that you desire no other reward save my blessing."

"I am the true descendant of Count de Cartaphile, who saved the Tomb."

"That is a fairytale, and I am inclined to think that you are aware of it, Count."

His perspicacity pleased and astonished me.

"Count, it is better to make the people believe than to believe oneself. An actor who really feels his part is not half the artist, nor half as effective as one who has learned his rôle perfectly, and gives the illusion of feeling. I prefer to deal with an intelligent scoundrel rather than with a zealot. The scoundrel, at least, has his price.

"Zealots are a great source of danger and infernal bores. Only recently, I was constrained to order the burning of Savonarola, Prior of San Marco in Florence. He was a scholar and a pious man, but lacking in humor as a man upon the rack. I was sorry to consign him to the flames, but he was undermining the structure of our Church. Besides, his implacable hatred of life revenged itself upon beauty. One statue is worth more than a hundred priors . . ." He reseated himself. "Well?" he asked.

"Your Holiness, I am not a zealot nor do I bequeath the Holy Grail for any other purpose except that of enriching the Church. I am satisfied to bask in her glory. I should also like to bequeath to your Holiness the ancient armor worn by my sire—"

The Pope laughed. "I hope sincerely that you are merely acting. A man capable of such jests delights me immensely. Who are you?"

His eyes, hidden a little in the heavy bags of flesh, darted sharp, short rays. He was certainly keener than Nero, taught in all the delicate nuances of the sophistry of the Church, and accustomed, like the rest of his family, to subtle intrigues. It would not be so easy to extricate myself from his suspicion, but the elements of danger added zest to the conversation. I was prepared for everything. The Borgias were famous for the poisons they administered to their prisoners and to their guests—candarella, a mixture of arsenic, quicksilver and opium. I had hidden a powerful antidote in the gold cross on my chest.

"Who are you?" Alexander reiterated.

"I am Count de Cartaphile, Your Highness."

He shook his head. "I know the genealogy of the Holy Roman Empire. There never was a Count de Cartaphile except, of course, in the legends of the Church."

I smiled. "It certainly would be neither proper nor indeed prudent to contradict Your Holiness."

"Fear nothing. You are my guest. Accept at least this much in return for your precious gifts."

"Holy Father, no greater honor has ever been mine."

"You bribed my officer, did you not, Count?"

This time I was really startled.

He laughed. "Am I not right?"

"Holy Father, I—"

"Do not fear, my son. I am your Father Confessor."

"I bribed him, Your Holiness."

"Of course. I know he is very faithful. He allows no visitors to disturb me, except for a consideration. A saint who fasts and prays for seven years lacks the knowledge of human nature and the sense of humor to bribe an officer of Christ's Vicar on Earth."

I smiled.

"And do you think that Pope Alexander the Sixth, a Borgia, would allow a knight in full armor to ride through the streets of Rome for three days in succession, without investigating?"

"It was for the very purpose of attracting your attention, Holy Father, that I rode through the city. Even a man who fasts for seven years knows—"

He shook his head. "A man who fasts for seven years and prays as incessantly as—Count de Cartaphile—would not offer the Holy Grail to Alexander the Sixth. He would declaim hoarsely against a Pope who neither fasts nor prays. He would not understand at all the difference between a religious faith and a gigantic government."

"Is not faith the supreme tenet of the Church?"

He struck the table with his fist. "No!"

I was uneasy. Was the Holy father always so frank? Did he single me out because I was a stranger? Was he attempting to draw me out? What was his motive?

"No!" he repeated. "The Roman Empire prospered without a special religion. Greece flourished on skepticism. What is needed is a strong hand and a cool head. Life is not an affair of prayer and fasting, Count. If we followed the example of the saints we would be barefooted, ragged and ignorant."

"It is not a question of this world, Your Holiness, but of the next. 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?' "

"Tut, tut! The soul? What is the soul?"

I suddenly remembered Pilate. *Truth? What is truth?*

"Is there no soul, Your Holiness?"

"The soul is an illusion engendered by man's fear of death. The sane man squeezes out of the earth all the pleasures it is capable of offering. *Carpe diem!*"

I remained silent.

"What is the soul, Count, compared to the senses—to the exquisite intelligent senses? You ought to know what I mean. You have traveled much and, if your name belies you not—loved much."

How much of my history did he know? This man was truly uncanny.

"I have traveled a little, it is true."

He laughed. "Is it a little to travel through China and India?"

I smiled. "It is not possible to dissimulate before you, Your Holiness."

"The cup comes from China. Of course, no one save you and I must know it. You speak to your valet sometimes in an African dialect. And a man like you would not miss India—the home of all cults and plagues."

A cardinal entered, red-faced and important.

"Well?" Alexander asked.

"The royal ambassadors are impatient, Your Holiness."

"That is well, Monseigneur. They will accept our terms. Bring me the map."

The cardinal bowed and walked out.

"The Chinese understand life and know how to turn excruciating pain into exquisite pleasure. You certainly," he leered lewdly, "must know the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged?"

I stared, amazed. Did there exist, perhaps, some organization or brotherhood of voluptuaries throughout the world, which initiated its members into the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged? Was Alexander VI a member of this fraternity?

The cardinal returned with a large map. The Pope bent over it, then, taking his goose-quill, drew several bold lines, dividing the world between Spain and Portugal.

"Summon the ambassadors."

The ambassadors appeared. His Holiness showed them the map. Pointing his stubby forefinger to the map, he said: "Henceforth, these lands and these seas belong to His Majesty, the most Catholic King of Spain, and these to His Majesty, the most Christian King of Portugal."

The ambassadors looked startled.

"Whatever new or old lands Colón and his followers may discover, I likewise allot to Spain."

"But Your Holiness," the Portuguese Ambassador ventured, "my exalted sovereign—"

Alexander continued, without heeding the interruption: "Except these islands, which by right of conquest appertain to His Majesty, the King of Portugal and his descendants forever."

The Ambassador repeated timidly, "Your Holiness . . ."

Alexander raised his finger. "Peace! Peace! The Vicar of Christ has spoken. Neither the word nor the sword shall erase the faintest line that his hand has drawn."

His Holiness extended his hand. The two ambassadors kissed the ring obsequiously and backed out.

"God speed," Alexander pronounced, making the sign of the cross.

The Pope rang a small gold bell. An officer entered.

"Captain, relieve the count of his armor."

The officer obeyed, waited a moment, and left.

"Sit down, Count."

I seated myself.

"Clothes shape our personality. In that armor, you were Count de Cartaphile who fasted for seven years that he might possess the Holy Grail which his ancestor had obtained from the hands of our Lord." He looked at me, and smiled. "Now you are a gentleman, relieved of the burden of piety and sanctity—a scholar, a master of wit."

I nodded.

"And my guest."

What was the sinister meaning of the word guest?

"This cup is too exquisite for the coarse lips of the multitude, but the Church needs money. We shall remember your deed and weave a beautiful legend about the myth of your ancestor. Posterity could do no more—even for Jesus."

"But Jesus was not a myth, Your Holiness!"

"You believe in the historical existence of Jesus?" the Pope asked with unconcealed amazement.

"Of course, Holy Father."

He laughed. "Have you never heard of the Hindu god Krishna? Is not Krishna—Christ?"

"But Jesus, Holy Father, actually existed. He was crucified and—"

"And resurrected too?"

I gazed open-mouthed at the Vicar of Christ, refusing to be entrapped.

"His birth and his existence," the Pope calmly continued, "are as true as his death and resurrection. The cross itself is a priapic symbol worshiped hundreds of years before Jesus. What warrant have we of Christ's life? The gospels, written centuries after his supposed death, are a compilation of preposterous nonsense that even a child, allowed to think freely, could puncture and ridicule with ease.

"The Roman writers of the period, addicted to gossip and exaggeration as they were, and ready to pounce upon any picturesque incident, never allude to Jesus. Josephus, the most meticulous of historians, ignores him entirely. Whatever mention of him is found in the later editions of his books, is a clumsy and all too evident interpolation."

"Your Holiness, can a legend subsist without basis of fact?"

"Imagination is a great architect. The flimsiest material suffices for a magnificent structure. How can a philosopher accept the multitudinous contradictions of the Holy

Book? How can he accept an absurdity as colossal as the Trinity?" He laughed. "There is a tribe in the jungle of Africa, with a triune divinity. The father is a man, the mother a camel, the son a parrot. Their religion is as rational as ours . . ."

"What is the name of this strange divinity, Holy Father?" I asked, laughing.

"I do not remember. Something like Pha-ta-pha—Yes, it must be that. The words read the same backwards as forwards. That proves the god's perfection, does it not?"

We laughed.

"Such flimsy pretexts are the foundation of all religions, Count."

We remained silent.

"How," the Pope asked suddenly, "could Satan with his poor bag of tricks tempt the Son of God? Why must the Only Begotten Son remind his Father, omniscient and omnipotent, that He is forsaken at the critical moment? 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me!' I could wring the neck of the idiotic monk who, transcribing the Bible, did not have sense enough to erase from it this unpardonable offense, both against Jesus and Yahweh! The whimpering son of an absent-minded father!"

He struck the table with his fist. The Holy Grail tottered on the Decameron.

"Is a legend strong enough to uphold the Church?"

"The Church is an organization, Count—a vast empire, composed largely of children. The average man is always a child. For his good, we invent fables and legends and promises, ridiculous and vain. Thus the favorite few may cultivate in peace and ease the fine arts and philosophies. The Church is the guardian of civilization . . ."

His logic was invincible. I would have gladly agreed with him. Alas, I knew differently! Once more reason failed. The irrational was the truth! Like the sudden flash of lightning which rends a clear sky, I saw before me Jesus, his trial, his crucifixion. And like the thunderclap which follows, I heard: "Tarry until I return." I closed my eyes. My head turned.

Alexander, proud of his eloquence, continued, but his words seemed to come from a great distance. My ears were smitten by the thunderclaps that frightened me in Jerusalem

"Jesus is a Hindu divinity. Mary is a less imaginative conception of Venus. The very name of the goddess, risen from the foam of the sea, thrills and intoxicates! Venus—goddess of joy, goddess of beauty! Venus—" He closed his eyes. His nostrils quivered. He reopened his eyes. "Venus has become a mother—a virgin mother!"

The thunderclaps died in the distance. The Pope's voice sounded clear and convincing.

"Jesus would have fared much better if infidels had presided over the Council of Nicæa! What a mess they made of it, Count! The bigoted Bishops disputed and wrangled and fought, and in their blind passion, they never realized that they included two contradictory genealogies of Jesus in the gospels! They should have edited either Luke's or Mark's. Besides, the attempt to trace the descent of Jesus to David, through Joseph, makes the immaculate conception preposterous. Jesus is either the Son of God, or the descendant of David. How can He be both at the same time?"

It amazed me not to be able to crush the shrewd and subtle Pope with powerful arguments.

"You are surprised, Count, that the Vicar of Christ does not believe in Him? Why shouldn't a Pope rise superior to his profession?"

I must make a dent in the armor of his conceit. I must defeat his logic by facts! I thought; besides, what subtle triumph for me if I, of all men, prove the existence of Jesus to the Bishop of Rome!

Was it a racial trait which made me anxious to prevail in an argument? Was it vanity? Was it my passion for truth? I cannot tell, but "Your Holiness is mistaken. Jesus lived! I saw him! I spoke to him."

Alexander laughed. "Many have spoken to Him."

I shook my head.

"Many have seen Jesus. Our nunneries are crowded with brides of Christ . . ."

Whatever the consequences of my confession, I would confute and confuse this son of the Borgias.

"If Your Holiness will permit, I shall recount the truth about Jesus."

He seated himself deeply in his chair, and playing with a diamond-studded cross that hung around his neck, listened without interrupting me. Avoiding unnecessary details and sentimental reflections, I told him of my quarrel

with Jesus. I described his trial and crucifixion, and in bold strokes, related the major incidents of my life, omitting only my excursion into Africa, Salome and Kotikokura.

When I had finished, he smiled. "In the archives of the Vatican, there is an account by a bishop—"

"An Armenian bishop?" I asked.

"Yes! You have read it, Count." He laughed, slapping his thighs.

"No, Your Holiness. It was I who confessed to the holy man, on the promise that he would not divulge my secrets."

"He speaks about this promise, it is true, and he does not disclose the man's history. He only recounts what was permissible for him to reveal," the Pope said thoughtfully.

It pleased me that the Armenian bishop had kept faith with me. I tried to recollect his face, but his features wavered in my mind like a torch in the wind. The face of Apollonius emerged, luminous and superb, instead.

"Ever since the story has become known," His Holiness resumed, "we are pestered by Wandering Jews. Ordinarily, they are either ranting charlatans or dupes of their own fancy. But truly, Count, a man like you—a thinker and a wit—should not indulge in so stale a farce . . ."

"I am telling the truth, Your Holiness."

"What is truth?" Alexander yawned. "And how can you prove it?"

"Holy Father, it is difficult to prove the simplest proposition. Mathematics, even, must accept certain premises and axioms, must accept the possibility of drawing a triangle or a circle in a universe which permits neither circles nor triangles to limit its endless flow . . ."

"You have not mentioned the shoes, Cartaphilus!" His Holiness laughed.

"Shoes?"

"Did you not leave a pair of shoes with the bishop?"

I searched my memory. "True, Your Holiness, a pair of sandals. My valet forgot them. I had to buy another pair as soon as I reached the first town."

He laughed uproariously. "Of course. What is the Wandering Jew without the shoes? He must always leave behind him shoes—symbol of his wanderings and of his father's profession."

His father's profession, I mused. Can we never extricate ourselves from our ancestors?

An officer entered, whispered something into Alexander's ear, and left.

"Ah, you are fortunate indeed! Come to the window, and we shall witness a magnificent spectacle."

A soldier opened the large brass gate to the west of the garden. Four stallions, two black, two white, dashed in. They galloped about for a few moments, then trotted quietly, their fine heads erect, their step elastic.

The Pope nodded. At one of the open windows of the Vatican, a young man and woman, holding hands, were smiling at the spectacle.

They were nearly of the same height, had the same raven-black hair, large dark-brown eyes, which they squinted a little, due to the light or to myopia. Their noses were strongly aquiline, rapacious as the beaks of birds of prey. Their lips, heavy and shapeless, pouted in perennial mockery. Debauchery was beginning to erase the more delicate lines of their chins. Their foreheads, rising above their heads like superimposed structures, radiated remarkable intelligence and unsavory subtlety.

Cæsar and Lucretia Borgia were undeniably their father's children.

His Holiness waved his hand. Cæsar answered the greeting by a similar gesture. Lucretia threw him a kiss. The young woman glanced at her incestuous companion —a significant glance, pregnant with meaning. Cæsar crushed her hand violently. She closed her eyes, and clenched her teeth.

His Holiness opened his mouth, and breathed deeply. I no longer doubted the rumor of the libidinous ties which united the Holy Father with his unholy family.

Meanwhile, the gate opened once more and two mares, as vigorous and proud as the stallions, rushed in. The latter stopped in their easy perambulation, sniffed and neighed noisily.

The mares ran to a corner of the garden as if seeking shelter. The stallions approached them. They ran away a short distance, and stopped again. The stallions dashed toward them. One of them touched a mare with the tip of his muzzle. The others rushed at him and bit him. He turned upon them, biting and kicking.

A terrific battle ensued. Blood and thick foam streamed to the ground. The hoofs, striking the earth, scattered sparks. The mares looked on tranquilly, chewing the sparse blades of grass.

A white stallion fell, his legs in the air. His enormous belly was ripped. The other three continued their warfare, neighing and snorting and stamping their hoofs. A black stallion looked up. Realizing, suddenly, the reason of the battle, he dashed toward the mares. His head was covered with blood and muddy foam, and his wet mane hung in clusters over his eyes. He pawed the ground and neighed vociferously.

One of the mares ran away. The other faced him for a while, then ran in a circle. He followed her, but not too closely for at every few steps, she made a threatening gesture.

The circles, however, became smaller and the kicking less vigorous. Suddenly the stallion reared into the air. The mare remained still, accepting the virile tribute of her conqueror.

The two remaining stallions were struggling wearily until, exhausted, one fell, his large tongue licking the great red wound from which oozed a thin stream of blood. The other breathed deeply, shaking his head violently to relieve himself of a heavy mass of foam. The second mare passed by. He neighed, lowered his head as if tossing an imaginary horn intended to pierce a foe. She turned as if attempting to dash away.

Pope Alexander and his children observed with glistening eyes the performance of the most ancient of cosmic rites. Alexander remained at the casement for some time, then turning to me said, his voice hoarse and trembling, "How beautiful! Alas, the gods have not made man to enjoy himself!"

Tall and grim, the Pope's secretary entered. "Your Holiness, it is time for Mass."

"Tell the cardinal to celebrate Mass today. I am not well."

"Saint Peter's is filled with people."

"I have spoken. Go!"

The secretary retired slowly, lips tightened in a gesture of disgust. At the door, he turned once more and made the sign of the cross.

"What strength!" he continued, as if he had never been interrupted. "What a magnificent motion! And the charming coquetry of the mares! How many women are as capable of arousing such passion? What sustaining power! For how many women would we sacrifice our lives?"

He walked up and down for a few minutes. "Is what you told me the truth, Count?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"Then—you are now nearly fifteen centuries old."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

He smiled cynically. "Do you feel the burden of the years?"

"No, Your Holiness."

He remained silent.

"How could you live so long without being seriously ill; without being wounded or scarred?"

"I have been ill, and wounded and scarred, Your Holiness."

"But you always recuperate?"

"Yes, Your Holiness."

His tone had changed considerably. He seemed annoyed at me, either because he was unable to prove that my statements were lies or because if what I said was the truth, I was incomparably his superior. Alexander VI knew he was mortal.

His silence perturbed me. In order to break it, I said: "Your Holiness, once by accident, I cut off part of my small finger. A hundred years later the finger, healing almost imperceptibly, was restored to its former size. I imagine, therefore, that all severed parts would grow back again, if man lived as long as the crocodile and the tortoise, who are well-nigh immortal."

"You were circumcised as a boy, I take it?" the Pope asked, raising his left eyebrow, and screwing his lips into a cynical smile.

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"Well, has beneficent Nature restored that whereof you were deprived?"

I was startled. It had never occurred to me to think of it.

"No Your Holiness." He laughed.

I smiled. "I am, after all, the Wandering Jew."

"This is ingenious, Cartaphilus, but it is not the truth."

I did not answer.

"Not the truth!" he exclaimed. "Acknowledge it!"

I remained silent.

He rang the bell three times. Almost instantly, three officers stood at the doors with drawn swords.

"Tomorrow, we shall see whether you are telling the truth or a lie. The rack will make you speak if I cannot. Besides, it will prove to you most emphatically whether in reality the beneficent forces of Nature can mend your broken limbs."

I rose. "Holy Father, you are jesting. What will the world say if the Vicar of Christ violates the sanctity of the confessional?"

He rose in his turn and placed his hand upon the diamond-studded hilt of a small dagger concealed under his robe. He spoke almost gently. "You know too much for the welfare of Christendom . . ."

"Holy Father, is this the reward for—" I pointed to the Holy Grail.

"For that we shall make you a beautiful legend. Cardinals shall read masses to your soul when you are dead—if you are dead—for ninety-nine years. No one may live who has listened to all I have told you."

"I have learned to forget, Your Holiness."

"Only the dead forget. . . . Besides," he continued almost caressingly, "you cannot die." Turning to the officer: "Surrender this man to the Fathers of the Inquisition. Order them to postpone all other trials until they have wrung a confession from him. My secretary will prepare the details of the indictment at once."

"Holy Father—" I pleaded.

"Silence, Jew! You ought not to complain. The Inquisition is an instrument perfected by one of your co-religionists—Thomas de Torquemada."

The officers approached and surrounded me.

"And by the way," His Holiness added, "he has a valet who is waiting outside. Tickle him also a little to make him speak. But first this man—a Jew and an infidel."

He motioned with his head and reseated himself. I was pulled away unceremoniously. His Holiness fondled the Holy Grail.

36. THE HOLY INQUISITION—UNTAPPED RESERVOIRS — A NUN VISITS ME — "DANCE!"—THE JOY OF LIVING—THE FRIAR OF WITTENBERG TALKS ABOUT LOVE—I RAISE A STORM

A LONG ROOM. In the center, upon a platform, a round table. In an angle, a bench, the length of a tall man, at one end a pole, at the other a windlass—a simple thing, almost a toy.

A soldier in back of me, the tip of his sword touching my body. At the rack, a colossal individual stricken with elephantiasis—an enormous face, the color of mud, a nose wrinkled like an elephant's trunk, crossed with heavy red and blue veins, and ears like two open palms. At the table, three stout individuals dressed in black.

The man in the center reading, reading accusations against me. Jew, blasphemer, mocker of Jesus, the Pope and the Holy Church, enemy of all Christian institutions, false claimant to the French nobility, plunderer of holy relics—reading, reading—

What would be the final judgment? Would I be burned at the stake? Would I become a mass of blisters and raw flesh, unable to live, incapable of death? Would I be ordered to the rack, my members torn from their sockets, my flesh cut into shreds, while consciousness persisted in each writhing nerve? Would I be buried alive, to feed, living, the worm that dieth not?

Should I confess or refute the crimes and sins attributed to me? Which meant less torture?

Never had I been in such imminent danger, not even

when the cenaculum of Charlemagne tried me for heresy and bribery. Then, I had a flicker of hope—the emperor might remember my services, he needed my drugs to relieve his pain. The Borgias knew neither mercy nor gratitude.

Meanwhile, the man continued reading, reading a strange and new version of the life of Cartaphilus, Wandering Jew, anti-christ.

Where was Kotikokura? Was he tried separately? Had he escaped? Had he, like some wild animal, scented the danger awaiting him?

The man read on. Soon he would stop—and then—no, Cartaphilus must not surrender without a struggle! But the soldier's sword touched my back, and the monstrous individual stood erect beside the rack.

The ring!

I turned it on my finger. A ray of the sun played upon it. It glittered like a small lamp in a dark cellar.

One of the three judges looked at it, fascinated.

I stretched forth my arms and fastened my look upon the inquisitor. The man blinked and tried to turn his head. He struggled. The tension was plainly tangible. I continued to concentrate upon him. The rays of the ring pierced his eyes. Suddenly he succumbed. His head dropped like a toy and he began to breathe with the regularity of a sleeper.

The man in the center droned on.

The inquisitor on his right rose suddenly, and raised his arm to utter a malediction. His fiery eyes sank into mine for a moment. In spite of the most desperate resistance, I held him.

"Sleep!" I commanded. "Sleep! Sleep!" My eyes burned into his. The ring splashed him with fire. Suddenly, no longer a man but an automaton, he breathed deeply, reseated himself, placed his head upon his arm, and snored.

The chief inquisitor looked up, astounded. I waved my hands. I recited a passage from the Vedas to distract his attention from his two colleagues. Catching his eyes, I held them with mine. His self disappeared in the whirlpool. He struggled like a drowning man, but the waves of energy emanating from me robbed him of his senses.

"Order the soldier who stands behind me to drop his sword and leave," I whispered.

"Leave!" he commanded. The soldier obeyed.

"Order the executioner to depart!"

"Depart!" he said.

The executioner departed.

"Now sleep! Sleep!"

He closed his eyes and reclined in his chair.

I breathed heavily through my mouth, like a man who climbs a steep hill, a load upon his back. But I was not exhausted. New strength had flowed into me from the untapped reservoirs of my life—the life of centuries.

The three men, snoring mechanically, looked like crows with their heads half hidden between their wings.

For the moment I was safe. But I was still within the chamber of the holy inquisition and outside, doubtless, were the sentinels of the Pope. I had to decide upon immediate means of escape.

As I was weighing the situation, the door opened. There entered a nun, so heavily hooded that hardly more than the lashes of her eyes and the tip of her nose were visible. She looked about furtively.

That gait . . . that carriage! Who was she? The nun approached me and lifted her veil.

"Kotikokura!" I exclaimed. "Kotikokura, my friend! Is it possible?" I embraced him.

He placed his forefinger to his lips and gave me a bundle. I opened it. Within it was a nun's attire.

In a few minutes, I was as orthodox a nun as walked the streets of Rome. Kotikokura made a gesture of admiration.

"Oh, wait a minute, Kotikokura! One must not run away so unceremoniously from one's host."

Upon the back of the scroll which contained the indictment for high crimes against me, I wrote in large letters: "To His Holiness, Pope Alexander VI, from the Wandering Jew." I put the scroll into one of my shoes which I carefully placed on the rack.

I looked at my judges. Suddenly the word "dance" reverberated through my mind.

I approached the table. "Dance!" I commanded. "Dance! Dance!" I repeated.

The inquisitors lifted their heads slowly, opened their eyes, and descended from the platform.

"Dance, dance!"

They raised their robes in the manner of elegant ladies and began to dance—a weird, disjointed, savage dance. In Kotikokura the dance aroused tribal reminiscences. He looked bewildered. His legs shivered.

Two gentlemen, traveling unostentatiously at random, wherever a boat might sail or a coach drive, squandering months and years with the prodigality of early youth. Ah, the joy of locomotion! The delight of being unrooted!

"Once I bewailed the fact that I had neither a country nor a speech nor a name. Once I mourned the length of my days. Man should live a man's span of years, I argued —then sink into eternal sleep. Ah, the joy of living on and on!"

Kotikokura grinned.

"Listen, Kotikokura! Listen to the tinkling of the sheep's bells! Listen to the shepherds' call! We are in Arcady, Kotikokura!"

A man, carrying a long cane, stopped before us.

"Do the gentlemen require a guide to climb the Jungfrau this morning?"

I shook my head.

"Every traveler likes to make the ascent."

"Has he whose shoes I saw this morning in your museum climbed to the top?"

He seemed not to understand for a while, then grinned, raising his upper lip.

"The Wandering Jew? They say he came from the other side of the mountain."

"Did he continue his journey barefooted?"

"The devil must have given him another pair of shoes. The devil always takes care of his own."

I was about to ask whether God did likewise with His own, but I desisted. . . .

We reached a little inn, set snugly between the rocks. The innkeeper invited us into the garden. At a table opposite ours a young Augustine monk, his arm about the waist of the waitress, sang, waving his cup in tune.

Upon seeing us, the girl blushed, and rushed into the house. The friar raised his cup and addressed us.

"To your health, gentlemen!"

We raised ours. "To yours, frater!"

I begged him to sit at our table. He brought his cup. I filled it. We drank to each other's health once more.

"They have splendid beer here," I said in Latin.

He looked at me, a little uncertain. His eyes were blue and candid as a child's.

"You speak perfect Latin. Are you a cleric?"

I smiled. "No, I am a retired gentleman with a hankering for scholarship."

"Many a nobleman nowadays takes to learning. The new invention of Gutenberg—"

"Gutenberg?" I queried.

"The printing press, sir, the printing press. It makes it possible to obtain a hundred copies of a book at a small cost. It enables everybody to judge for himself the works of the masters."

"I am by no means certain that to spread knowledge indiscriminately is a benefit to mankind."

He wiped his finely curved lips with the back of his palm and looked at me, his brow knit.

"Am I speaking to an enemy or to a spy?"

"I have not even had the pleasure of knowing your name, frater."

"I am Martin Luther. In Germany, the mention of my name causes a storm."

"Your scholarly attainments, I am certain, deserve recognition from Rome."

"No! Martin Luther is the enemy of the Pope! I will translate the Bible into German. Every Christian shall read the words of Jesus. The words of Jesus will blast the antichrist in the Vatican."

"To the Pope the Church is an empire—not a religion."

Luther waved his fist. "If it is that, then we have the right to dethrone the monarch. We have the right to secede from the empire. Germany for the Germans!"

"If Germany disclaims the Vatican, will she build a Vatican of her own?" I asked.

"The Pope needs Christ, but Christ needs no Pope."

I was not thrilled. Why did I not offer my gold and my services? This German monk could be a powerful weapon in my immemorial battle with Jesus. What could destroy the Nazarene more effectively than a schism? A house divided against itself must crumble. I could awaken Mohammedanism from its lethargy. I could remind it of

Allah and his Prophet. I could stir up racial memories in Mecca and in Medina.

Alas! The salt of victory had lost its savor. The sword was placed in my hand, but I had not the desire to wield it. Vainly I endeavored to discover clearly the origin of my quarrel with Jesus. Vainly I tried to revive the ancient anger of my heart. My memory was a heap of ashes. Of the great conflagration that once surged within me, only a few sparks, dim and cold, rose wearily out of the ashes.

But even as a man who, weary from much walking, finds it difficult to sit at once, so the ancient impetus, the ancient gesture persisted. Even, I said to myself, if my quarrel with Christ no longer envenoms my life, let Christianity perish. Encourage the fist that strikes against its walls.

I rose and raised my cup. "To Germany and to freedom from the bondage of the antichrist!"

Luther rose in his turn, and clinked my cup. Suddenly he glared at me, shouting: "*Apage satanas!*" I was too startled to stir.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" he shouted again, his blue eyes glittering. Raising the wooden inkstand, the shape of a soup bowl, he hurled it at me. I bent quickly, escaping with a scratch upon my cheek.

"Frater," I asked, "why this violence?"

He squinted.

"Forgive me, I beg of you, my friend. I thought I saw Satan." He crossed himself. "He often comes to tempt me. Sometimes he comes in the shape of a cleric. Once he appeared as the Pope, wearing upon his tonsured head the triple crown of Alexander the Sixth. One night he stood over my bed as a vampire with long sharp teeth, and a blue beard, dipped in blood; at dawn he comes to me as a young witch, with tempting lips and inviting thighs."

"Do incubi, succubi and devils really visit human beings?" I asked.

He looked at me in childish wonderment. "Is it possible that you doubt it?"

"I have never seen any."

"It is because you have not recognized them. They are the subtlest of creatures. I can smell sulphur a mile away. It is only on rare occasions, such as today, that I err."

"Perhaps not even today, frater," I smiled

He laughed. "The devil is not quite so subtle." Nevertheless, he threw a rapid glance at my feet.

"Not cloven," I remarked. Should I goad him on with offers of material help? I must—once more! If I failed this time, I should consider myself vanquished. And if I won—if I won—what indeed should I win? Who knows what new and bloody idol will usurp heaven, if Christianity dies!

Luther, his right arm in the air, continued, "I am going back to Wittenberg, and upon the gate of the Schlosskirche I shall nail my ultimatum to antichrist. I shall challenge the devil to answer my theses!"

"You may divide Christendom."

"There is more joy in heaven over a handful of real Christians than over a million sellers and buyers of Popish indulgences."

I remembered the words of Alexander. "It is better to deal with scoundrels than with zealots. Zealots have no sense of humor." This man was a zealot, but he could be merry. He loved woman and wine. To test once more the truth of logic or its utter bankruptcy, I would help him.

"Every man will read for himself the sacred Word of the Lord. I shall translate the Holy Scriptures into the beloved and simple tongue of my fathers. There shall be no more secrecy or mystery."

"Is it not dangerous to allow the uninitiated to interpret the Scriptures?"

"Far less dangerous than to allow a set of men, many of whom are more ignorant and more stupid than laymen, to misinterpret. The priests have robbed my poor countrymen until they are on the point of starvation. They have browbeaten us until we dare not raise our heads. They have stultified the intelligence of our peasants until they have become more brutish than the beasts of the field."

The waitress appeared on the threshold. Luther rose and, stretching out his arms, called to her, "My beauty, my dove, come hither!"

A man who could change so rapidly from divine to mundane affairs was destined to achieve greatness—if no accident intervened. Thus, I imagined Mohammed must have dismissed Gabriel the Archangel, to embrace his buxom wives.

The bottles were brought and emptied. Luther and I told anecdotes. The proprietor laughed uproariously, slapping his belly.

"Don't tell me any more, gentlemen! No more, or I shall die laughing."

"In a few hours, I leave for Wittenberg," Luther said suddenly, grown pensive, "but whether I shall reach it the Lord knows."

"Are the roads so dangerous?"

"For Martin Luther."

"Would you allow me and my friend to accompany you?"

He looked at me. His eyes had the vision of faraway places, as Mohammed's had of the desert. He placed his hands upon my shoulders, making the sign of the cross over me.

"It is the will of Jesus. . . ."

Long before we reached Germany, we heard the name of Martin Luther, either whispered in praise and hope, or hissed with a curse.

"You are already history, frater."

He sighed. "I should have preferred to devote my life to writing quietly in my cell."

We were walking between two rows of immense poplars. The cool shadow stretched peacefully and unconcerned, like a black god, deaf to the futile clamor of the universe. Luther wiped his forehead with a large kerchief and breathed deeply.

"Should a new Christianity arise from the ashes of the old, would man be allowed in truth to speak his thought?" I asked.

"Even so."

"Would you abolish the celibacy of the clergy?"

"Nothing in the Holy Bible commands man to live alone. The Lord created all good things for the joy of his children."

This in itself, I thought, is worth the effort. Fighting to purify religion, this monk may restore paganism. Perhaps Athens and Rome will be born again in their glory. If it is true that man appears again and again in slightly different guises and incarnations, why cannot whole civilizations return from the grave? Life, the gigantic snake, constantly sheds and re-dons it coat!

"Frater, I believe in you and in your power."

He pressed my hand.

"You will purify Christianity and make Europe more habitable. You will bring love and intelligence and freedom."

"For the glory of Jesus, amen."

"Will you permit me to have a share in this regeneration? Your struggle will be greater than you suspect."

He smiled. "There will be such a storm, my friend, as when Lucifer with his host was driven out of Heaven."

My resolution was made. "Frater, however spiritual and divine our ideas may be, gold is always essential for their execution . . . I have gold, frater, very much gold."

He withdrew a little.

I smiled. "Does Martin Luther fear my money? I will donate fifty thousand guilders to equip the army of truth and freedom at Armageddon."

Luther did not answer. He bent his head. The breeze ruffled his thick curls. Suddenly, he began to make very short, deliberate steps, as if counting them.

"It is God's will, else He would not permit you to cross my path."

"I shall give you my gold, on one condition—"

He raised his eyebrows.

"That this transaction remain a secret forever between us."

He seemed reluctant.

"It is my penance for an ancient sin."

"Very well. You shall explain when we meet Lord Jesus face to face."

It was dawn. Luther slept peacefully, as a child, his fists closed.

"Kotikokura," I whispered, "come!"

We walked away on tiptoe. At a sufficient distance, I said, "Kotikokura, we are now in sight of Wittenberg. It is safer for us not to be in the company of a man who will make history. We must change our direction."

He nodded.

"Whither shall we wend our enormous feet, Kotikokura? We might go to the new countries to the east of us, but they say the inhabitants are still savage." I meditated for a while. "I have it, Kotikokura! We have never been across the channel."

He did not comprehend.

"The channel, my friend, separates Europe from England, and permits the latter to enjoy peace while the former is in the throes of endless conflicts. They have a great university in England—Oxford. I shall drain the paps of wisdom for a while."

He grinned.

"I am serious, Kotikokura. I know more than Dr. Faust who sold his soul to the devil, but I must organize my knowledge. I have been neglectful of late—these several centuries. I have not read enough what the sages have written. I must learn their opinion of man and the universe. And you—it is about time you learned how to read and write, Kotikokura."

He made a grimace.

"You must! You heard Luther say that knights are becoming scholars. You have reached the age—"

"No! No!"

"What? You prefer to remain ignorant and illiterate?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You think life is sufficient."

He nodded.

37. WE CROSS THE CHANNEL—KOTIKOKURA LEARNS TO WRITE — QUEEN ELIZABETH PASSES—DUST TO DUST

Hold my arm, Kotikokura, or we may lose each other in this artificial night."

We took small careful steps, our hands in front of us, as if descending into a dark cellar.

The fog thinned and ripped in various places. It crawled out of the branches of the trees; it rose from the hats of people like smoke out of chimneys; it swept the ground like a phantom broom. Some obstinate shreds, laboring under the illusion of weight, clung to a fence or a wall, diminishing, thinning. Suddenly the sun, like the standard of a conquering army, rose triumphantly over the peak of the citadel of the world.

The Thames, crowded with barges and small sailboats, flowed tranquilly under the bridge. A few patches of the fog, the size of kerchiefs, still floated on its surface.

We entered a coffee house. The people were drinking jugs of dark beer, discussing the future of the lands discovered by Christopher Columbus. Several boats had recently left England. Wherever Her Majesty's flag was planted, that was English ground. Some foretold trouble with Spain; others predicted inconceivable wealth from the New World.

"Kotikokura, let us clink cups to our success. Without

my gold, Columbus would never have been able to equip his ships."

Kotikokura clinked.

"If these lands are really another continent and not merely India, man can drown the errors, the stupidities, the cruelties of his ancestors in the sea, and begin anew, Kotikokura. In life's comedy man must improvise, rhyme at random, strutting about from one part of the stage to the other. The discovery of Columbus enables him to rehearse his part—to improve his acting. For once the gods are merciful! And yet, Kotikokura, I suspect their kindness."

Kotikokura drank his beer and wiped his mouth.

"To start afresh! That is man's cry through the ages. Destroy the tree of life, plant a new seed! Poor Bluebeard—that was the meaning of his gory hocus-pocus. What a horrible seed he planted! Can man tear the roots that bind him to Adam? New lands, Kotikokura—but where are the new people? A New World, but the same race of men."

We walked out arm in arm.

"Kotikokura, tomorrow we leave London for Oxford, to learn the wisdom of the ages. Your infancy is over. You must learn to read and write."

Kotikokura grumbled.

"But my friend, even the queen of this land knows how to read and write."

"Queen—woman."

"If necessary, Kotikokura, I shall have to use the birch on you."

He looked at me, uncertain whether to take me seriously or not.

After our departure from Oxford we spent a generation or two in Ireland. Under the name of Baron de Martini I bought an estate, where life flowed on as a small river hidden between two valleys.

One day a rock was hurled into the quiet waters. An heir of the man from whom I had bought my estate discovered a flaw in the title. I determined to go to London to seek justice at the fountain head.

London fluttered like a young bride. Flags, music, confetti, laughter, and colors—a hundred nuances of red, green, blue, yellow—as if a rainbow had been crumbled

and scattered by some absentminded divinity, or one awaiting nervously the verdict of a goddess he courted.

London expected the Virgin Queen.

"Kotikokura, we are fortunate. We have arrived on time. It is a good omen. We shall win our case."

Trumpets announced the arrival of Queen Elizabeth. Soldiers urged and pushed the crowds to the two sides of the streets, making room for the procession. A regiment of cavalry preceded the landau all gilded and dazzling like a setting sun, drawn by six milk-white steeds, arrogant, as if the applause and the hurrahs were intended for them.

The queen sat erect as a statue, a coronet upon her head and masses of jewels upon her chest and arms. In her right hand, she held a scepter, in her left a large fan of peacock feathers. It was not possible to tell whether she was thin or stout, for her dress, hooplike and stiff from the whalebones, occupied nearly the entire carriage, which moved very slowly to allow the people to gaze upon their monarch. From time to time, she nodded slightly to one side or the other.

The people shouted: "Long live the Queen! Long live the Queen!" Many in the front lines knelt; others threw flowers and confetti on the horses or against the wheels, careful not to strike the august occupant.

For a fraction of a second, her eyes met mine. The procession seemed to whirl about me. I closed my eyes tightly as if to lock within them the impression they had received. When I opened them again, the landau had already passed by, leaving behind it a small hillock of dust.

"Did you see her eyes, Kotikokura?" I asked nervously.

Kotikokura shook his head. He had noticed her fan, the largest he had ever seen.

"They resemble Salome's, Kotikokura!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Her hair—did you notice, Kotikokura?—also resembled Salome's, but it was a wig."

Kotikokura watched the people throw flowers and ribbons and hats into the air.

"She has a ruler's face, Kotikokura. There is no doubt of that; majestic, serene, wise. But what does she lack? What ingredient in her make-up repels rather than attracts?"

Kotikokura was busy removing the wet confetti which a girl had thrown at him, and which dotted his entire face like colored smallpox.

"She is neither man nor woman! Have you noticed that?" I said a little irritably. "She is like the Sphinx we saw in Egypt, Kotikokura. Impenetrable as stone. No wonder she is a virgin!"

Kotikokura grinned.

"Ah, if Salome were queen! If she drove in a golden chariot through the streets of her capital! Man would grow mad with beauty! Ah, Salome!"

The last horseman galloped past us. The people began pushing in all directions, shouting to one another, exclaiming their last hurrahs.

"Come, Kotikokura. Here is a bookshop. Let us enter for a while."

The owner, a very small man, clean-shaven, red-cheeked, approached us, limping a little, and bowing deeply.

"Have you seen the queen, gentlemen?"

"Yes."

"Alas, I could not go. My rheumatism did spite me just on this day! Is Her Majesty as beautiful as our poets claim?"

"She is," I answered.

He raised his eyes, so vague a blue that they appeared nearly white, and sighed profoundly. "Who knows if I shall ever have the joy of gazing upon my queen?" he exclaimed.

"No doubt you will," I consoled him.

"Is the gentleman interested in the new edition of Master Shakespeare's plays?"

"No."

"The classics, no doubt. The gentleman is a classicist. I have Cicero and Aristotle and Plato and Marcus Aurelius."

"Marcus Aurelius?" I asked.

"A fine old edition."

I examined the book, seeking a passage I had heard the emperor read while his beautiful wife toyed with her slave. . . .

"Ah!" I exclaimed, as I read: "Be thou erect or be made erect." The eyes of the empress had closed a little and the fan of the youth had grazed her face.

I seated myself on a bench and continued reading, recalling the emperor, the visitors, the old whispering artist. Kotikokura seated himself on a rung of the ladder and read, moving his lips, a child's book with letters almost as tall as fingers.

"Nothing is true!" I shouted rising. "Nothing is true save dust!"

The bookseller, taken by surprise, shivered and retreated, grasping his rheumatic leg. Kotikokura dropped his book to the floor.

"Nothing, I tell you! What is Marcus Aurelius but dust? And his wife who betrayed him under his nose, while he preached virtue—dust? And all the lords and ladies that flattered him while he droned monotonously? Dust—dust! Does it not choke you, as it chokes me?"

"Yes, milord!" he groaned, "all dust. Ouch! What a leg, sir, what a leg!"

"In this you have an illustrious predecessor," I remarked, "Charlemagne—Charles the Great, Emperor of the West, suffered from rheumatism."

"Is it true, milord?" he asked, dazed.

"But for a long, long time now, he has been relieved of the torture. Dust does not pain, my friend. Keep that in mind and it will help you greatly."

38. FRANCIS BACON, LORD VERULAM—I GO TO THE THEATER—THE JEALOUSY OF KOTIKOKURA—ANTONIO-ANTONIA—I LIFT A CURTAIN—THE MASTER THIEF

THE LONDON SOLICITORS were more garrulous than the Irish and their more meticulous knowledge of the law made it less possible for them to reach a conclusion. My plan was to receive a favorable judgment without appearing before the courts in person. What judge was both powerful enough and susceptible enough to gifts to accomplish this? For the time being, it was uncertain. Queen Elizabeth died unexpectedly and the favorites of the new king were as yet unknown.

"It is best to wait, Kotikokura. Meanwhile, let us travel about the country, learn its customs and habits."

Upon our return, I discovered that Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, a philosopher whose work I had read and admired, had been appointed Chief Solicitor of the Crown.

I wrote him a long letter in which I praised his great contribution to philosophy, and begged him to accept, as a token of my profound appreciation, a watch, the shape of a little book, studded with precious stones, the work of a Florentine artist.

The lord's reply was an epistolary masterpiece. He invited me to Gray's Inn where, despite his position, he was still constrained to live.

The lord's kindliness and simplicity were equal to his greatness. He thanked me profusely for my gift, the most appropriate and opportune conceivable, and particularly agreeable since it came from Florence, the most beautiful of cities which he had visited in his youth. I thanked him for the praises he had accorded my city which my ancestor, a man of the same name as I, Baron di Martini, had helped to enrich by his remarkable work in history and by his love for art.

"The Florentines, like the Athenians of old," Bacon said, sighing a little, "are the only true patriots. We do not understand the meaning of patriotism. Mere allegiance to king and flag is not patriotism. A man should identify himself with his country, should merge into it as a tiny stream merges into a river. Greater still is the patriotism which flows beyond the frontier of one nation, uniting with the limitless sea of mankind."

He twisted his short red beard and bit its tip. His eyes, round almost as an owl's, stared into the distance.

"I discard all philosophies, for philosophers prefer to proclaim their own abstract notions as truth. They never take the trouble to observe. They prefer to close their eyes tightly and speak in terms of the darkness in which they live."

His words thrilled me. Had man at last awakened from the lethargy of futile scholastic argumentations? Was he endeavoring to see truth, to love reality?

"Man," he continued, "can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature; beyond this, he neither knows anything nor can do anything. In my main work, *The Novum Organum*," he said, "I elucidate the questions we are discussing."

"I am most anxious to see the work."

"Alas, who knows whether I shall ever complete it? I have been laboring at it nearly all my life but—" he stopped, sighed, and pulled one hair out of his beard.

"Is it a matter of health, my lord?"

"Health, too, but mainly duties that occupy my time—duties and debts. I beg your pardon, Baron. I have no right to burden you with my troubles."

"On the contrary; you honor me greatly. Perhaps, too, if it is merely a matter of money—"

"Merely a matter of money, Baron? Money! People

speak so glibly about it. Money—is it not the basis of all reality?"

"The lack of money," I answered, "is a greater reality than its possession."

He smiled.

I considered this the most favorable moment of broaching the matter of my suit.

Lord Verulam listened attentively and meditated. "Give me a few days' time to consider this, Baron. I believe it can be adjusted—not so easily, perhaps, but it can be."

He looked at me, his round eyes blinking a little. We understood each other.

He glanced at his watch which hung around his neck by a golden chain, also my gift.

Then, once more philosopher and man of the world, Bacon directed the conversation into other channels.

"Ah, it is time for the play. Is the baron interested in the theater?"

"Life's distorted reflection in the mirror of art always amuses me."

"Will Shakespeare of the Globe Theater is putting on *Romeo and Juliet* today, a charming play, though too sentimental. Master Willie Hewes is positively enchanting as Juliet. So consummate is his acting that one can hardly believe he's a boy. Would you care to see the performance?"

I accepted the invitation.

The play pleased me mildly. The plot, which I had read in several Italian stories, was hackneyed, the end decidedly stupid. But Master Willie Hewes was exquisite.

When had I seen a youth so handsome, so delicately fashioned? Where had I heard so musical a voice? Who in my memory compared with him? Walhallath? John? Damis? He was as beautiful as they, but more piquant. Perhaps it was the rôle he was playing or the glamor of the lights that enhanced his fascination.

His Lordship looked at me, chafing a little in the stiff ruffle about his neck. He noticed my agitation.

"How do you like the lad, Baron?" he asked with a smile.

"Willie Hewes, my Lord, resembles a younger brother of mine who died years ago."

"Should you desire it, Baron, I shall ask Willie to join

us over the punch bowl. He is quite a manly fellow, swears, drinks, fences, and makes love to the wenches. If the lad were less enamored of Shakespeare, he could choose a titled lady for his bride. But his strange passion—"

"A youth's whim, my lord. Besides, is not this Shakespeare the playwright?"

"Yes, of course. Willie's love may be a reflex of his admiration. Meanwhile, however, the scandal sears his character. I told him so, but he would not listen to me. He recited the sonnets Shakespeare dedicated to him. They are not shocking to a classical scholar, but they make ribald tongues wag in London. However," Bacon laughed, "I nearly fell in love with the lad myself."

"The youth intrigues me, my lord."

Lord Verulam called Willie. He jestingly admonished the youth about his morals, pinched his cheek and prophesied the gallows for him.

"Your acting was inimitable," I said.

Willie smiled and thanked me.

"I have not seen your equal on the stage."

The lad blushed a little, closed and opened his eyes slowly. I looked intently at him. "You will forgive me, my lad," I said, "if I scrutinize your face. You resemble most strangely a brother of mine whom I loved exceedingly."

Willie looked at me. "Your eyes are like mine."

"My brother—Antonio—resembled me."

"Antonio! What a pretty name!"

"Will you allow me to call you by that name?" I asked. "It thrills me—the memory."

"Do please call me Antonio. It's delicious. And since you are my brother, how shall I call you?"

"Cartaphilus."

"Cartaphilus? What a strange and beautiful name!"

"It means the Much Beloved in Greek, Antonio."

He winked slightly. "Is it merited?"

"You are wicked, Antonio. His lordship tells me that your reputation is scandalous. The other Antonio," I added jestingly, "was a good and virtuous youth."

The boy looked at me sadly.

"Why do people misinterpret everything, Cartaphilus? Even so wise a man as Lord Verulam. Only Master Will knows the soul. He knows—"

Piqued by a sudden sense of jealousy, I said, "Carta-

philus knows his brother better than Master Will. And to make amends for his awkwardness and folly, he will buy his brother the finest cloak in London—and a silver sword, and a bracelet of gold."

His face clouded suddenly. "My brother is mocking my poverty. Yes, I am but an actor—an outcast from respectability, and my cloak is neither overbeautiful nor overnew." He made a step away from me.

"Antonio!" I exclaimed. I looked deeply into his eyes, as if piercing his very soul. "Are you not my brother? Shall I not celebrate our reunion after such a long absence? Give me your hand and tell me that you too rejoice that we have found each other again."

He squeezed my hand.

We walked arm in arm, discussing the theater, morals, life. I had never met so precocious a youth. Thus must Salome have been in the first bloom of her loveliness! Thus she must be again, if she overcomes the moon. . . .

Behind us, two boys carried the things I had bought for my new friend.

What strange emotion indeed drew me to this boy? He seemed dearer to me than Damis, more lovable than John. I pressed his arm which, though firm, had the soft contours of a girl's.

"Who are you, Cartaphilus?" he asked me, almost in a whisper.

"Your brother, Antonio."

"My brother is the strangest man I have ever laid my eyes upon. He is more beautiful than the moon which lies upon the crystal pillow of the lake. His language is as sugared as Shakespeare's."

"Do not speak of Shakespeare, Antonio!"

"You are jealous, Cartaphilus," he laughed. "I am happy that you are jealous! I see that you are, after all, a man."

"And you, Antonio?"

"I am—a—woman."

"What did you say, Antonio?"

He laughed uproariously. "Should it not be so—a man—a woman? Always that. All plays, comedies, tragedies—what are they but a man and a woman, seeking or avoiding each other? Shakespeare often turns his tragedies into comedies. By a slight twist here, a change there—presto, a comedy has become a tragedy and vice versa. Romeo and Juliet he first conceived as a comedy. Romeo marries

his sweetheart. And there was an epilogue, too, in which —" Willie smiled sadly. "No, that was really too gruesome. The epilogue showed them as husband and wife, quarreling and hating each other. It was Shakespeare's own life. He could not endure it. It was too horrible."

"Is Shakespeare very unhappy?"

"Very."

"This is why you love him."

"Perhaps."

"I wish I were unhappy, Antonio . . ."

"You will never be unhappy, Cartaphilus. You have the temperament of an actor. You will always be able to change your part if it becomes too unpleasant."

This youth's intuition was uncanny. He knew me as well as I knew myself after centuries of meditation!

Upon seeing Willie, Kotikokura became gloomy. I detected a murderous twitch in his hands. Willie sensed his animosity and straightway began to placate him. He called him a hundred endearing names. He wrestled with him, patted his face, ruffled his hair. Kotikokura, bewildered, began to grin.

Carried away by the merriment, we danced until out of breath, we fell in a heap upon the floor.

"I am thirsty, Cartaphilus," Antonio whispered.

"Kotikokura, wine!"

Kotikokura filled our cups. Was this a dream, a play by Master Will Shakespeare, or reality?

"Oh, I forget," Antonio rose with a jerk. "My new garments! I must try them on."

"By all means, little brother."

"I do not like to be naked in the presence of other people," he said seriously.

"Not even in mine?"

"Please—"

"We shall not embarrass you then, Antonio. Dress in that room behind the curtain while Kotikokura and I drink another cup together."

"No peeping," Antonio warned.

"I swear it."

Kotikokura poured himself a cup of wine, emptied it at one gulp, and repeated the process three times. He wished to forget something, to drown some emotion. Was it love for the youth, or hatred, or jealousy? Very likely, a mingling of all these emotions, too entangled and irri-

tating. He stretched out upon the floor and snored promptly.

Willie Hewes was still dressing himself. I could hear now and then a movement, a creaking of the floor. A desire to see the youth naked possessed me. And there was something else, too, something I could not explain, a curious uneasiness. Did he really feel embarrassed? How unusual for an actor! Did not Bacon say that the youth was known for his escapades with wenches, that his reputation at the Globe Theater was not that of a modest youth?

I promised I would not peep. I might arouse his displeasure. At the beginning of friendship, it might prove disastrous. But even while these ideas crossed and recrossed my brain, my hand carefully lifted a corner of the curtain.

The long Venetian mirror reflected in gorgeous nakedness—not Antonio, but Antonia, the most beautiful of girls—two small breasts round as apples, a throat as firm and smooth as marble, hips and arms and a torso dazzling as the morning sun. The body was firmly knit as a boy's but rounded delicately, giving the illusion of softness. The hair, curled and cut at the nape of the neck, resembled that of a Grecian statue.

"Antonia," I whispered.

Willie turned around and caught her breath. By an ancient instinct, she covered her breasts with one arm, with the other her femininity. Her face flushed, her lips parted.

"Cartaphilus! Did you not swear—"

I embraced her. "Is it not infinitely more delectable to find that Antonio is Antonia?"

"Everybody will hear of it now and I shall have to leave the theater. I shall have to be merely a woman. No more for me to live with the joy and recklessness of a boy!"

"How can you think that, my love? If Antonia desires to be Antonio, shall Cartaphilus frustrate her wish? How much more poignant her beauty, vacillating between boy and girl."

She raised her head, and wiped one tear that hung midway between the eyelash and the cheek.

She clasped my head and looked into my eyes.

"Is it right for Cartaphilus to love his sister?"

I seated her on my knee upon the edge of the bed. I fondled her delicately with my lips and fingers.

"Cartaphilus is not your brother, Antonia. He was never your brother. He was always your lover. Antonia desired to be Antonio. She said she had been intended for a man. And now, at last, she is—and yet is not—a man. Is there anything more exquisite in all the world than Antonia-Antonio—Toni—both in one?"

She pressed my lips against hers, biting them a little with the edges of her teeth, then fell asleep in my arms.

I placed her gently upon the bed, undressed and joined her. My first passionate caress awakened her.

"Cartaphilus—I love you."

"And not Shakespeare?"

"When I am with Cartaphilus—no."

"Tell me what prompted you to disguise yourself as a boy?"

"It was the only way I could be near him, since the law does not permit our sex to appear on the stage."

"But Shakespeare knew your sex?"

"Not at first . . ."

"He loved you . . ."

"Yes. He was completely bewildered at first, but in his heart of hearts, he suspected my secret."

"How do you know?"

She pouted. "Because he poured his soul into his sonnets." Her lips moved, caressing each word affectionately.

And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting
And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding something to my purpose nothing.

"And when he discovered that nature had not been so cruel?"

"He was overjoyed. It remained a sweet, shameful secret between us. If my true sex were known, I would be banished from the stage, and the Lord Chamberlain would punish Will. In the eyes of the law we are no better than vagabonds."

"Do you like to play the boy, to be his play-boy?"

She hesitated a minute. Then she said shyly, "Yes." She blushed. "He called me master-mistress of his passion . . ."

We spent the rest of the day and the night in the exquisite pleasure-pain of amorous dalliance. At one momoment, she reminded me of Antonia, at another of Antonio, and as I fell asleep, she was Salome in the desert.

When I awoke, the sun glared into the room and Kotikokura slowly raised the curtain.

I stood up.

"Where is she, Kotikokura? Where is she?"

Kotikokura grinned, thinking that I was dreaming. I realized that he had probably never guessed the delectable gender of Willie Hewes.

"Where is the youth?" I asked, jumping off the bed.

Kotikokura handed me a letter.

Dearest Cartaphilus,

If I remained another night with you, I should never be able to go back. I must tear myself away as one tears an arm out of its socket. But it must be done, my love, my brother.

Will Shakespeare is the saddest of men and his life is a torture. Without me, what would become of him? He would nevermore write. He needs me.

As for me—what does it matter, Cartaphilus? How long more can I be Willie Hewes, or Antonio, without suspicion? How long more before—no matter, dearest—my heart breaks! A thousand kisses.

P.S. Forgive me if I do not accept your gifts, save the little chain. I must return to Will Shakespeare as I was before I met and before I loved too much the Much-Beloved. . . . Toni.

I turned my face to the wall and wept.

39. ENGLAND SMOKES—MERMAID'S TAVERN—WILLIE HEWES GIGGLES—A LETTER FROM SALOME—I RETURN TO AFRICA—I AM DETHRONED

Lord Verulam sent a messenger to fetch me. He was very cheerful. He had studied my question carefully. There was a way to silence those preposterous heirs.

"I found it for you, because your case is just. Never in all my career did I pronounce judgment in favor of him whom I considered guilty. I have received payments and gifts for my labors, it is true, but never—I swear it by my God and country—have I betrayed truth and justice." There was a strange pathos in his voice. "By the way, Baron, do you smoke?"

"I have noticed the popularity of the pipe in England. What is it you smoke?" I asked.

"Tobacco. A plant recently introduced from America. It is the best thing that has come out of the New World."

He offered me a pipe. We seated ourselves deeply into our chairs, and blew the smoke upward like chimneys of homes where abundance reigns.

I thought of Salome and the desert and Flower-of-the-Evening, and as I closed my eyes, the image of Willie Hewes reappeared before me in the glory of her epicene youth.

Why had she left me for Shakespeare? "Another night with you and I should never be able to go back."

"My lord," I said suddenly, "what can you tell me about this Master Will Shakespeare?"

"You have seen his *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Yes, I know. But is he really a genius?"

Bacon smiled. "The age of geniuses is past, Baron. We must resign ourselves to be people of talent. Master Will is a clever craftsman, but he is a thief. He steals with the unconcern of a child whose conscience has been untutored. 'Mine,' he calls out gaily, whenever he comes across something that pleases him. He has done me the honor to borrow from me."

"Do you allow this, my lord?"

"It amuses me. I hear people praise him: 'What depth of thought and emotion!' They really praise me unwittingly. Besides, I have enough ideas to spare for a poor fellow who is hungry for fame as a cat is for mice. If only he would not be so anxious for the applause of the groundlings and torture my ideas and the charming fancy of the Italians into such barbarous forms! My gracious sovereign, Queen Elizabeth—may her soul rest in peace—had a fancy for him and his work. She used to go to his theater masked, and she established his reputation."

"Do you believe, my lord, that his fame will be enduring?"

"No. He will die with his generation. The only man who may outlast his contemporaries is Ben Jonson. He is a scholar and a thinker, but his daily broils are intolerable."

"Is he handsome?"

"Who?"

"Shakespeare."

His Lordship laughed uproariously. "Handsome? A face like a bagpipe the Scots use for serenading their lasses, a head bald to the neck with a fringe of red that looks like the scrapings of carrots."

"How does it happen, then, that Willie Hewes is so obsessed with Shakespeare?"

"I do not understand it, Baron. It is scandalous on Will's part to parade his emotions so brazenly. The boy does not know better. His age is his excuse. You and I are men of the world. We understand classic vagaries. But the world condemns them, even in its more liberal moods, with an obscene smirk. I have spoken to Shakespeare about the boy and his own reputation on several occa-

sions. He looked at me bewildered and tears rolled down his puffed cheeks. He is intolerably sentimental. I turned away."

"Willie Hewes is a strange youth."

"I like him immensely. The stage will spoil him, I fear, and his association with Shakespeare is unfortunate. I do not approve of the new movement, headed by people nicknamed the Puritans, for purging a man's soul by destroying it, which seems to gain a firm foothold in England. But there are limits beyond which freedom is license. Shakespeare has been accused of being a panderer. His treatment of his poor wife almost exhausts my patience."

"Is he married?"

"He married at the age of seventeen, I believe, forsook his wife, leaving her to support his two or three children. He still refuses to return to her bed, preferring to play Jupiter to his Ganymede," Bacon snorted indignantly.

We remained silent, puffing at our pipes slowly. How could Antonia-Antonio love such a man? What hidden charm or beauty did he possess which made him attractive to her?

I determined to seek Shakespeare and his master-mistress in their nightly haunt.

"Where," I asked, "is the Mermaid's Tavern, whither I am told the immortals of England foregather?"

Bacon laughed.

"Have a jug of ale with me and the literary cutthroats of England tonight!"

We entered the Mermaid, arm in arm. A long, narrow room, crowded with vociferating people. A heavy smell of stale tobacco, ale and frying foods. We remained standing and looked about.

"There is Master Shakespeare, Baron," the lord whispered.

I had already espied him. Bacon's description was admirable. Willie Hewes, her face still besmudged from theatrical paint, held one arm around his neck while with the other she raised a cup to her lips. She saw me. Her arm remained stiffened for a moment, then proceeded quietly its way.

"Antonia," I said, without sound, merely moving my

lips. She looked at me, utterly unconcerned, as if I had been a stranger.

Shakespeare, tears rolling down his cheeks, was reciting at the top of his voice, with false pathos:

Goode friend, for Jesus' sake forbeare
To dig the dust enclosed heare;
Bleste be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

No one paid attention to his bibulous whine of the epitaph he proposed for his tomb. Tearfully he repeated the verses again and again. Willie Hewes stopped him. Shakespeare placed his head upon her shoulder and sobbed.

"Antonia," I repeated.

She raised her head a little and I saw the small golden chain I gave her glitter about her neck. She raised her cup again and swallowed the contents quickly. Her lips were covered with foam which she wiped with the back of her hand.

A man, not very tall, but enormously stout, rose suddenly from a table and cup in hand, began to dance about, spilling the ale upon his great stomach which shook like half-frozen jelly. The rest applauded and shouted compliments and vulgarities.

"This is Ben Jonson, Baron," Bacon laughed.

"If these are gods, what are men?" I asked.

"The reflection of their gods," he answered.

Ben Jonson whirled about and upset, with the sweep of his arms, the cups upon the table. The guests rose, swearing and challenging one another to duels.

I looked once more at Willie Hewes. She was giggling drunkenly.

The memory of Willie Hewes tortured me. Was it love? Was it disillusion, jealousy, pity?

"Kotikokura, I am tormented."

Kotikokura made a wry face.

"This place bores me and it bores you too, I notice."

He nodded.

"Where shall we go? What shall we do?"

He scratched his nose.

"If Salome—"

A servant interrupted with a letter.

"From Salome!" I shouted to Kotikokura.

Kotikokura shrugged his shoulders.

The letter was written in Chinese interspersed with Hebrew and Arabic. She scolded me for having risked my liberty so often. She called me an irrational child. She upbraided me also for the assistance I gave Luther. He hated the Jews, and favored the burning of witches. Europe had become a cauldron of controversy, stupidity, cruelty and confusion. Why could I not discover something worthier of my age and knowledge than religious wars? But then I was a man, too restless, too impulsive, too romantic to grasp the eternal verities. She loved me, nevertheless, or perhaps because of it. She was still a woman and therefore a mother.

This letter was to inform me that she had set out on a journey. Where? Well—could not Cartaphilus guess, as Salome had guessed his whereabouts?

I walked up and down the room, thinking, debating.

"Kotikokura, I have it! I have it! She has gone to Africa. At any rate, what place can you imagine more appropriate for us two, Kotikokura?"

He bent almost in two.

"Let us go back to Africa—the cradle of the universe! Come, high priest of Ca-ta-pha!"

He bowed three times to the ground and made the sign of the Camel, the Parrot and Ca-ta-pha, by dividing his body into three cardinal points.

"Kotikokura, look!" I gave him my telescope, a recent invention of a Hollander.

"Do you see that church surmounted by a cross?"

He nodded.

"Is it not on the spot where the temple of Ca-ta-pha stood? Do you know what this means, my ancient friend?"

He looked at me, his face drawn.

"It means that our enemy has conquered. I am a god no longer; you no longer a high priest."

"Ca-ta-pha god always!" he exclaimed, half sobbing.

"And Kotikokura his high priest. But where are the people who worship us?"

Kotikokura began to weep.

Two natives, dressed as priests and blacker than their garments, carrying a tall wooden cross, were followed by men and women singing and beating tom-toms.

"Hearken, Kotikokura! The song is the selfsame song they intoned for me. The words are altered. The melody has remained intact. We are not dead! Our souls live in the new body!"

Kotikokura was about to jump off the camel. His hands twitched.

"No, no, my friend! You must learn to lose gallantly and accept the inevitable. This is the meaning of intelligence and the secret of happiness."

The procession disappeared in the woods. We approached a tree.

"Wait a minute, Kotikokura. There is something carved upon this tree."

I read: "No matter, Cartaphilus! Other gods have died before you. Other queens have been dethroned. Other high priests have been defrocked. Farewell. Salome."

"She always precedes us, Kotikokura, and always knows our paths and our emotions. I am afraid of her. But the fear of her is more exquisite than all other love, all other joy."

40. THE BROKEN VESSEL—EUROPE IS SICK—THE NEW PROPHET—I DISCUSS GOD WITH SPINOZA—NEW VISION—APOLLONIUS WALKS WITH US—I MAKE MY PEACE WITH JESUS

We continued our journey, sadly, silently. Now and then, Kotikokura grumbled menaces and anathemas, waving his fists.

The camel drivers whom we had left some miles away from our destination, to await our possible arrival within three days, were jubilant at our unexpected return. They kissed our hands, patted our animals, and blessed Allah and Mohammed, his true Prophet.

"Kotikokura, once Christianity was a vase too strong for any hammer. That the vase was not beautifully fashioned or acceptable to logic, is another matter. At least, it stood erect and motionless in a world of storms and hurricanes. But the vessel has been shattered to bits. Whatever essence it contained has been spilled and mingled with the mud. Each country, city, and petty community has placed upon its altar a fragment, shapeless, meaningless, and worships it, calling it the full vessel, the only true one. Whoever speaks of another fragment or recalls the full vessel, risks excommunication and the rack."

Kotikokura nodded.

"It is more difficult to travel through Europe than to pirouette among eggs. We must be extremely wary, Kotikokura. We must imitate with utmost precision, every word and every gesture. Christianity has become more

intricate than the Chinese language, and a sound placed slightly higher or lower on the Chromatic scale is an unpardonable blasphemy."

We traveled slowly and cautiously, adopting the dress, the religion, the customs of the various countries. We shouted hurrah with the people on the public square upon the passing of soldiers or royalties. We crossed ourselves properly in the churches and upon general religious festivities. Our names and our appearances changed with the changing countries. We were clean-shaven. We wore pointed beards, full beards, mustachios.

"Each nation is clamoring for justice, Kotikokura. Do you know what it means by justice? It means a sharper sword. It means the ability to crush its neighbors. Each one prays to the Lamb. Do you know what the prayer is? 'Make us more ferocious than tigers; more powerful than lions! Let our teeth be sharper than the teeth of all others, that we may tear our enemies to bits! Grant us victory, O Lord! We shall bring as sacrifice to your Holy Name, O Perfect Lamb, the bleeding flesh of the vanquished!'"

Kotikokura nodded.

"Do not imagine, however, Kotikokura, that Europe will die because of its iniquities. Only in legends, such as the Bible, iniquity kills. In reality, only a grain of justice, of love, of intelligence, of freedom is required for existence, and that grain always exists by force of circumstances and despite religions or the volition of man. Europe will not die, for that would imply a logic which life does not possess."

Kotikokura nodded.

"But if it will not die, it is nevertheless covered with ugly ulcers like a leper and the stench is unbearable—particularly here in Germany. This poor country, once the seat of strength and robustness, has become the pleasure-ground of wild beasts and birds of prey. Let us not linger too long."

Kotikokura nodded sadly.

"They say that there is still one country in Europe which has retained civilization and freedom."

He looked at me inquiringly.

"Holland. I overheard, while you were engaged in fondling a kitten, two students who believed themselves safe since they spoke in Latin in an inn frequented by

coachmen and soldiers, that in the capital of that country, there lives a man whose work in philosophy is beautiful and illuminating. They say he is a Jew, a polisher of lenses, who has refused to become a professor at the university or accept money from the prince. On the crest of a hill of dung, now and then a rose blossoms. Such is the strange way of life. The glory of a civilization is but the achievement of a few rare souls. The rest is manure.

"Let us seek out this new prophet."

Holland seemed, in truth, a more comfortable place than the rest of Europe. The inhabitants had recently proved their personal prowess and the advantage of their geographical situation to an astounded world. If it was not characteristic of their stolid nature to show much enthusiasm and exuberance, one breathed, at any rate, an air of confidence and quiet happiness. The small houses, white wood or brick, were spotless in their cleanliness. People of a dozen religions lived if not lovingly together —something which could hardly be expected—at least without murdering one another.

Nevertheless, being a foreigner, I preferred not to ask freely for the whereabouts of a philosopher once excommunicated by his own people and generally considered, if not an atheist, at least an indifferent believer.

From an old bookseller, I discovered that Benedictus Spinoza, finding Amsterdam unsuitable to his health, had for some time now been living at The Hague, if indeed he was still living.

At The Hague, a lens polisher informed me that the renegade lived on the outskirts of the city, taking greater care of his lungs than of his lenses.

An old woman, clean as if she, too, had been whitewashed and scrubbed like the houses, scrutinized me for a long minute.

"The master is in his room," she said, pointing to the attic. "He has been writing for the last two days steadily. He should not do it. He is not feeling very well."

The stairs creaked.

"He is coming down, sir."

Spinoza appeared—a middle-aged man, his face drawn, his eyes large and brilliant as if they had just looked at a newly discovered star. He gave me his hand.

"Master, I come from the end of the earth to see you."

He smiled. His finely shaped lips curled a little, his eyes closed halfway. "I do not deserve this honor, sir, I am certain."

"To see a man free from the superstitions that ravage the world is worth a trip from the moon."

Spinoza played with one of the long black curls that fell over his cheek. "Experience has taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile, seeing that none of the objects of my fears contained in themselves anything either good or bad, except in so far as the mind is affected by them." He coughed. "I wonder, my friend, if you would care to walk with me along the shore? I love the sea. We come from the sea and shall eventually return to the sea. She is the mother."

Spinoza stopped from time to time to breathe deeply, or to cough, bending upon his cane. His face was smooth and the two red spots upon his cheeks, the symbol of the fire that consumed his lungs, gave him a youthful appearance.

"Master, have you read of Apollonius?"

"Only here and there. He was one of the few who understood God."

"God?" I asked, a little ironically. "I thought there were gods, but no God."

He looked at me sadly and nodded. "The many gods do not refute God, my friend."

"I am older than I seem, master," I said, "and I have traveled the world over, but I have never discovered God."

"It is not necessary to live very long, nor is it essential to travel the world over to discover God. God is everywhere and eternal. Neither time nor space bind Him and the foolishness of the people does not destroy Him. The world is one, and all things in it are parts of one self-evident, self-producing order, one nature which is the Substance, which is God. The substance is eternal, bearing no relation to time. All things, even those that happened a million years ago, are eternally present. There is no before and no after."

I could make no remark, ask no questions. His words thrilled me as if the sea in front of us had suddenly changed into a majestic orchestral composition; as if the sky had burst into a luminous white light.

"Jesus," he said softly, "claimed to be the Son of God, and so He was, and so were Mohammed and Moses, and so is everyone—every man, every creature, however humble, however powerful, each partaking of the divinity to the extent of his ability and nature. God is everywhere, always. We are not only His sons, we are He. Our finiteness is lost within His infinity, even as the thin stream that trickles down a mountain into a rivulet which flows into the large river, which in turn mingles and becomes the salty depths of this sea."

Spinoza coughed and closed his eyes.

"Master, were it not wiser to return home? The air is very strong here."

He looked at me and smiled, placing his hand upon my shoulder. "We must die, sooner or later. The fool alone fears that which is inevitable. The wise man looks upon death as a soft, cool bed wherein he may rest after the fever of the day."

"Would you consider endless life a blessing or a curse?"

"I would consider it useless, but not a curse. God inflicts no penalties. The true mind knows nothing of the bandage of time, thinks of no before and no after, has no future, dreads nothing, laments nothing; but enjoys its own endlessness, its own completeness, has all things in all things."

"Then, Master, the Wandering Jew may not be a myth at all."

"The Wandering Jew is truth whether considered as a living entity or a personification of his race. He is the symbol of restlessness and search. Some day he will find what he seeks, and will no longer wander."

"What does he seek?"

"God. The wise man, my friend, loves God with a fragment of that very love wherewith God loves Himself and his meditation is not of death but of life, of the eternal life whereof he is a part and has ever been and ever will be a part. He is bound as a nut in a shell, but he is the monarch of infinite space. The nightmare of his phantom life has ceased to trouble him."

The air became chilly. Spinoza wrapped himself tightly in his black cotton robe.

I did not wish to be importunate, and let a few days pass before I visited Spinoza again.

"Come, Kotikokura, this time you will accompany me. ou, too, must hear the master's words, limpid as the aters that tumble from a mountain. Kotikokura, we no nger wander strangers in an inimical country. We are ie children of God—God Himself."

"Ca-ta-pha god."

"Yes, he is god. Kotikokura god also. The sun is god. his butterfly that perches upon the window sill, mis-aking it for a meadow, is god. The air we breathe, the ater we drink—everything! Life is a perpetual eucharist! h, Kotikokura, the curtain of night has been lifted, and he truth is beautiful."

On the threshold of Spinoza's home, the old woman at, knitting slowly. She was not aware of our arrival. Kotikokura scraped his foot. She looked up. I greeted her. She answered vaguely.

"The master," I said, almost in a whisper, "is he in his oom? May I see him?"

"The master," she answered, "is dead. He was buried esterday," and lowering her head, she proceeded to knit, ears trickling upon her hands.

I remained standing, silent for a long while. Then I eated myself next to her.

"What has become of the master's papers?"

"They are locked in the drawer of his table. His printer vill take care of them. So the master ordered."

"Did he suffer much before he died?"

"It was during the night that he began to feel ill. I vent up. He smiled and motioned me to approach. 'Mas-er, shall I bring the priest?' 'No,' he said, 'it is not neces-ary. God knows everything.' I began to weep. 'Foolish ittle mother,' he said. 'Why do you weep? Must not ev-eryone die?'"

"For the master's sake, I wish you would do me a avor, little mother."

"What favor can a poor old woman like me do?"

"I want you to take this purse that your last days may ot weigh too heavily upon you."

I placed the purse in her lap.

She looked at me for a long minute, kissed my hand, nd made the sign of the cross.

"May Jesus repay you for this, sir."

"Jesus has paid me in advance. It is because of him hat I had the good fortune of meeting the master."

I took Kotikokura's arm and we walked slowly homeward. "Jesus, Spinoza, Ca-ta-pha—all Jews, and all denied by their people. Strange race giving birth to gods whom they do not recognize, whom they crucify, stone and stab. Stranger still that Spinoza whom I only saw once should have made me realize that I no longer hate Jesus, that he is of my blood, that he is my friend! Who, indeed, should know Him and love Him, if not Ca-ta-pha?"

A dove, white as a handful of snow, descended from one of the houses and settled at our feet.

"Kotikokura!" I exclaimed, "Jesus lives. He lives and Spinoza lives and Apollonius and all those who thought beautiful thoughts, whose hearts beat in harmony with the universe, with God."

Kotikokura raised his arms toward the sun and uttered the prayer of his tribe.

I communed in silence with the world spirit; my soul was one with the universe.

41. AT THE DOCK OF SAARDAM—THE HUMOR OF THE TSAR—I BUILD A CITY—THE EMPIRE OF GOLD

We were standing at the dock of Saardam, watching the work of the shipbuilders. Suddenly, one of them, a man of gigantic proportions, waved his arm and spoke to the rest in a strange jargon, a mixture of German, Dutch and Russian, but quite comprehensible nevertheless.

"Who of you wants to go to Russia? The Tsar will pay you ten times your wages here. He will give you full protection, will let you keep your religion, and your customs."

The rest looked up, some smiling, a few waving their fingers about their temples to indicate that he was raving.

"He has been saying this since he came to work a week ago," said one. "Maybe he is a spy."

"But if a spy, the government would have been after him."

"Yes, that's true. He is just a little off."

"Those of you who are unmarried will find beautiful and strong women there. Those of you who have wives and children will get extra wages. Who wants to go to Russia?"

Several laughed. One shouted, "You better go on with your work or I'll tell the boss."

"Who dares to speak to me in that manner?" He raised an enormous log and was about to strike. The people

retreated. He dropped the log, which rebounded several times.

"In Russia, your head would have rolled at my feet."

"And he wants us to go to Russia," one laughed.

The others joined him.

"Slave on here! You would have become rich in Russia. Fools!"

He turned his back upon them.

"Kotikokura, who is this man? Look! We knew him. We saw him. Those eyes, that chin, his stature, his strength—who?"

Just as he was about to turn the corner, I called out: "Attila! Attila!"

Kotikokura nodded vehemently. The man heard me, stopped in front of us, scrutinized me, and smiled broadly.

"I am a descendant of Attila. Wherever I pass, I conquer."

"You are not a descendant merely, sire, but Attila himself," I said bowing low. "Is it so difficult to recognize a king, sire?"

"Who are you?" he thundered.

"I am Your Majesty's servant," I answered.

He threw his arms about me and kissed me on both cheeks noisily like the clapping of hands.

"Peter Romanoff is your friend. Will you come with me to Russia?"

"Wherever Your Majesty commands?"

"Who is that man?" He pointed to Kotikokura.

"My companion, sire."

Kotikokura made a profound obeisance.

"I like his face. He looks like one of my people."

Peter walked between us, holding our arms.

"Can you imagine, the fools not willing to go where fortune awaits them? Could they not recognize me? Do I look like a common laborer?"

"Your Majesty, the sun shines in vain for the blind."

"Splendid! You will teach my ministers the art of courtesy. I want to turn my court into a more magnificent palace than that of Versailles. Louis the Fourteenth is splendid. He has taste and manners. He treated me discourteously, but—" he raised his arm and waved his fist—"I shall be the emperor of the world! I need men. I need a navy. These fools will not come."

"They will come, sire. I shall persuade them."

"How can you persuade them when I found it impossible?" he scowled.

"Your Majesty, the people are accustomed to respect the uniform. I shall talk to them dressed as a high officer of your army. They will come."

He looked at his boots and laughed heartily. "I do not blame the poor devils. Does a great emperor wear muddy boots and a torn coat? Promise them everything, my friend."

We entered an inn.

"Wine!" Peter ordered.

We seated ourselves at a table. Kotikokura filled very tall cups.

Peter raised his cup. "To Russia!"

"To Peter, Tsar of Russia!" I toasted.

Peter crossed himself and drank another cup. His face flushed, twitched, as if a fly were pestering it.

"What is your name, my friend, and what is your nationality?"

"Once my name was of great consequence and people trembled at it. Now I have none. I await Your Majesty's baptismal. And my nationality? I am a Russian!"

He looked at me, his fine lips pouting, his small mustache shivering. "You are of royal blood." He rose, poured some wine over my head. "In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and His servant, Peter Romanoff, Tsar of Russia, I baptize you Prince Daniel Petrovich—for you are as wise as the prophet Daniel and I make you my son. You shall be my chief minister."

I kissed his hand over which a few drops of the wine trickled. "Permit me, sire, to be your shadow, rather than your minister."

"So be it."

His Majesty poured some wine over Kotikokura's head. "In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and His servant, Peter Romanoff, Tsar of Russia, I baptize you Duke Samson Romanovich—for you are as strong as Samson and the adopted son of the House of Romanoff. You are the commander in chief of the Tsar's bodyguard."

The innkeeper laughed, considering it all the farce of drunken men.

Peter's eyes closed and he began to snore.

"Is there a bed here?" I asked the innkeeper.

"Yes, upstairs."

"Samson, let us take His Majesty to bed. It is not well for an emperor to expose himself to the ridicule of the rabble."

The arrival of Peter at Moscow occasioned a universal panic. The conspirators so vociferous, so arrogant, during his absence, scurried off like frightened mice. This dismay was largely due to a rumor that I had caused to be spread from town to town as we were reaching the capital, that the emperor was returning with a vast army of German, Dutch, and English mercenaries whose new guns and cannons were capable of bombarding places from a distance of many miles.

The Kremlin was empty, save for some old serfs who, uncertain of what was transpiring, continued to tend the gardens.

The emperor seated himself upon the throne, Kotikokura in the garb of a general, heavily medaled on his left, and myself at his right. At the various entrances, officers stood at attention, their swords drawn.

"There must be no mercy, Prince," Peter thundered. "We are in Russia now. My people understand only the knout and the sword."

"We shall respect the customs of the land."

"Samson, I have given you your medals in advance of your deeds. See that I am not compelled to tear them off your chest, skin and all."

Kotikokura stiffened up and stamped his enormous sword.

I almost regretted having accompanied this strange and terrible Monarch. The affair, however, promised to be a huge comedy, and I could not refrain from taking a part in it. Kotikokura was superb in his new attire. Did he take his new position seriously? Sooner or later, there would be a crisis, I was certain. Despots weary of their favorites. I must warn Kotikokura. He was but a child.

The patriarch, the chief of the Strelitzes and several Boyars, appeared. They formed a semicircle about the throne.

Peter glared at them in silence for a long while, then stood up and pointing his forefinger at them, exclaimed, "Traitors to your God, your Emperor, and your Country!"

They fell upon their faces, grumbling words of mercy.

"Grunting hogs, bearded and dirty! You thought you could outwit and outpower Peter Romanoff. In his absence, you turned his palace and his country into puddles of mud in which you wallowed, planning the while to rid yourself of your lawful master, divinely appointed!"

"Mercy, little father," several grumbled.

"How dare you ask for mercy?"

The Patriarch raised his head. "But unto us like Jesus, Master of all of us, little father!"

"Judas!" the emperor shouted, and unsheathing his sword, severed the priest's head with one blow. The blood jutted out of his neck like some fantastic fountain.

"Duke!" he commanded Kotikokura, "let this scoundrel's head be placed upon a spike over the roof of the palace as a warning to others whose hearts may harbor treachery. Do the same to the rest of these wretches! Throw their carcasses to my dogs!"

Kotikokura waved his sword. A bugle sounded. A company of soldiers appeared. They dragged the corpse and the bodies of the rest who were too limp to move.

I summoned an officer.

"Perfume!" I commanded.

He brought a large bottle of perfume.

"Your Majesty," I said, "Pilate, who could not endure the smell of the rabble, washed his hands with perfume at the trial of Jesus; and Nero, the lover of the beautiful—maligned and misunderstood by vulgar historians, found the essence of flowers invigorating and delightful."

Peter cupped his hands, which I filled to the brim. He washed his face, and breathed deeply through his mouth. "Daniel Petrovich! You will civilize us! Ah!"

He smelt the tips of his fingers for a long while.

For three days and three nights Peter gave a feast in the Kremlin.

Even at the orgies of Nero, I had never seen such abandon—voluptuaries without refinement, mighty drinkers and eaters, Homeric heroes resurrected. The day was for food and wines, the night for endless and promiscuous embraces.

Never since my bath of beauty and Salome's feast in Persia had I witnessed such unlimited sensuality. The men vied with one another in capacity, the women in endurance. Wagers in gold and slaves and mistresses

were made for what seemed incredible prowess of mere human beings.

Kotikokura outdid three Russians in their feats of endurance. The women gazed at him with terrified desire. He was supremely happy.

"Kotikokura," I whispered, as he passed by. For the first time in centuries he did not hear.

Pathetically sober and disgruntled I watched the fretful pageant.

Two of Kotikokura's competitors died from heart failure. One was carried out on a stretcher. The festivities ended with the decapitation of ten of the guests. Five were quartered to boil in oil and six women immured in nunneries for having made in their drunkenness remarks disrespectful to the majesty of the Tsar.

"Your Majesty," I said one day, "however sedulously a man endeavors to repair a house that is fallen into ruins, he will find always walls crumbling, the ceiling leaking, the cellar infested with vermin and rats. It is wiser to build anew. . . ."

Peter was in the habit of thinking quickly.

"Where shall I build my new house?"

"On the Baltic, sire."

He undid one of his medals, a cross studded with diamonds, which he wore upon his chest, and pinned it upon mine.

"Let us drink to St. Petersburg, the new capital of Holy Russia."

The insight I gained into world politics through the wars and the treaties of Peter made me realize that Europe would be ruled, in the future, neither by armies and navies nor, before very long, by monarchs, but by wealth. The bankers were becoming the potentates of the world. The Tsar, influenced by courtesans and monks, considered my idea visionary and derogatory to his divinely appointed authority.

I founded banks at my own risk. With the aid of a few men of affairs, chiefly Jews of Spanish and Portuguese descent, I established wide financial ramifications. The credit and the currency of the emperor were weapons in my hands. Peter never dreamed that I, not he, was the real master of Russia!

Russia alone, however, was unsafe. I needed expansion —a great net to capture all nations. If I controlled the world's money, I could never lose. No one could win without me. Life was a lottery in which I held all numbers. . . .

Peter grown stout, gouty and tormented by pains in the groin, drowned his troubles in vast quantities of vodka. He proclaimed himself the patriarch of the Holy Synod. The slightest deviation from his whims was not alone an insult to the crown, but to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. About his neck he wore an immense black cross of wood. He counted rosaries until he fell asleep.

The symptoms indicated too clearly the end of his reign. His successors would not relish the favorite of a predecessor. The moment for my departure had come.

"Kotikokura," I said one day, "It is time for us to leave this half-barbarous nation to her fate. Our tsar is no longer the charming man who won our hearts in Holland. Tomorrow, dressed as two ordinary noblemen, we leave for the West."

Our departure was hardly noticed. My shadowy position had been becoming more shadowy for some time. Indeed, it was difficult to know who was in power and who merely wore the trappings of officers. My banks, however, were firmly established. They were owned by myself under many names—a much safer way.

As we crossed the frontier into Sweden, I raised my arms and breathed deeply.

"Let us thank the eternal God, the God of Spinoza, that we escaped whole from the jaws of the bear. Few have accomplished that feat!"

Kotikokura doubled up and made the sign of my godhood.

42. THE THRONE OF THE GOLDEN CALF—I MAKE A DEAL WITH MAYER-ANSELM ROTHSCHILD—FREDERICK PLAYS CHESS—I QUARREL WITH VOLTAIRE—VOLTAIRE'S FAUX PAS

KOTIKOKURA, Ca-ta-pha shall rule man more truly than all the other gods, for he shall be the master of his bread and of his roof. Ca-ta-pha shall be worshiped by every man, woman, and child. For as soon as he is able to articulate words and until he utters his last sound, man worships money. Ca-ta-pha shall be the god of money!"

"Ca-ta-pha god always."

"Where are your medals, Kotikokura? They will serve as passports for us, and open many doors. For a long time to come, we shall be Russian noblemen. Russia is still a land of mystery and legend. Anything I may care to tell will be believed—not because I am Ca-ta-pha, the oldest man in the world, who has seen empires rise and fall but because I am a Russian."

Kotikokura undid his belt, which was closely lined with medals of all shapes.

"You were indeed the favorite of the Tsar, Samson Romanovich."

I was walking along the River Main in Frankfort, meditating on the words of Spinoza and the meaning of life, when someone tapped me gently on the arm. I turned around. A little man with a sharp nose, sharp eyes, sharp pointed beard and a sharp protruding belly, bowed deeply.

"Ich bitte um Verzeihung," he said in a sharp voice.

"By whom have I the honor of being addressed?" I asked.

"I am Mayer-Anselm Rothschild, the banker."

"I am Prince Daniel Petrovich."

"I know."

There was something so poignant, so dynamic in this little man, that I withdrew a little.

He smiled. "People are generally afraid of me. My friends call me the living sword. But Prince Daniel Petrovich certainly does not fear Mayer-Anselm Rothschild. Prince, I have a proposition which may interest you. Would His Highness care to visit me at my office?"

I hesitated a moment. "Very well. I shall come."

He hailed a carriage and we drove to a shop over which a red sign with the word banker swung lightly.

"I am not more than twenty-five, Prince, although I look much older," Rothschild said, as soon as we were seated at a table. "But this is because I have thought and worked so hard. I know you are not against youth. I understand that most of the men you engage are young."

"It is true."

"The older generation does not understand the new world which is growing in front of their noses."

We spent several days discussing plans and measures for gigantic investments. This young man's mind was as sharp as his physique. I entrusted him with a large sum of money.

"Rothschild, I have confidence in you."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"You will succeed. Your descendants, if they are as intelligent as you—"

"I am married to a woman of character and intelligence, Prince."

"Good! Your descendants will be weathier than kings." He bowed.

"Rothschild, we may not meet again, but you will feel my influence. I shall work in silence, invisible. Let it seem always that you are the sole master."

"Never, Prince."

"Extend our business to the end of the earth, Rothschild. Consider the world an angry steed which we must ride. Underneath our yoke he may foam and fret, but he will obey nevertheless."

Rothschild grinned, his teeth set.

"They say that King Frederick of Prussia is amenable to humor and wisdom."

"So they say."

"I must visit him then."

"Kotikokura, this is Sans-Souci. Sans-Souci may be but a bit of irony for which His Majesty is famous. However, it is interesting that he refused to admit me on the strength of my Russian title, but invites me most cordially because I speak all the languages of Europe and because I studied philosophy at Oxford."

Frederick the Second was playing chess. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at me, nodded vaguely, and continued his game. Suddenly, he struck the table and shouted. "General, you have forgotten your rules of war. This move is inadmissible."

The general, an elderly man, bald to the neck but making up for his lack of hair by two long side beards which reached to his chest, replied in a bass voice, contrasting comically with the king's falsetto: "As Your Majesty commands."

"Not as I command, general, but as the ancient law of chess commands."

Turning to the others who were sitting around, smoking long porcelain pipes, the new vogue, or snuffing, Frederick continued: "Gentlemen, was not the general's move inadmissible?"

Several whispered, "Yes, certainly, Your Majesty."

The King frowned. "Prince," he said, addressing me, "do you play chess?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, and you were wrong."

Frederick stood up full length and stared at me.

"How do you know I was wrong, Prince, since you entered after the general had made his move? Besides, you are too far away from the table to see the board . . ."

"Your Majesty, had you been right, there would have been a vociferous reply to that effect from all these gentlemen, not merely a hardly audible 'Yes, certainly, Your Majesty.'"

Frederick laughed. "Prince, you have a sense of humor and an independence of mind which I try to foster in all my friends."

He stretched out his hand, large but too delicate for his frame. I kissed it.

"Prince Daniel Petrovich of Russia," he called out to the rest who rose and bowed.

One thin man of uncertain age, yellow and wrinkled, with eyes that darted long rays, sitting apart from the others, chuckled.

His Majesty glanced at him. "Monsieur de Voltaire wants to be noticed, gentlemen. Well, monsieur, why do you laugh?"

"His Majesty spoke of the independence of mind which he tries to foster in his friends, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Yes."

"Well, that is why I laughed, sire."

"Gentlemen," Frederick addressed the rest, "are you not permitted independence of mind and speech in my company?"

The reply was a long acclamation.

"*Voyez-vous, monsieur?*"

"*Non, sire, j'entends.*"

His Majesty's nostrils shivered, his fists stiffened over his heavy cane.

"Prince, have you ever heard a citizen speak thus to a monarch?"

I smiled inconclusively.

"But do not forget, Prince, that the citizen is Monsieur de Voltaire, whose pen is sharper than a monarch's sword," remarked the thin-lipped philosopher.

Several emotions crossed the face of the king.

"Shall we try it, monsieur?" Frederick made believe he was unsheathing his sword.

There was general laughter. His Majesty clapped his hands. An officer entered.

"Beer!" he commanded.

We seated ourselves around the enormous fireplace in which crackled and glowed a heavy log whose resin perfumed the place. Two great greyhounds curled themselves around the King's feet. From the painted bowls of the pipes resting comfortably upon the stomachs of the men, rose grayish smoke, curling into weird patterns.

We emptied many steins of beer and general gaiety prevailed. Monsieur de Voltaire, who abstained from drinking, grinned at intervals.

"Gentlemen, Prince Petrovich can speak every lan-

guage of Europe and Asia." Fredericus Rex addressed the rest—three officers, two scholars, one cleric, and several noblemen, "You are all learned and masters of many tongues. Can any of you compete with the Prince?" Turning to me, he said, "Not as a test, Your Highness, but merely *de curiosité, vous comprenez.*"

"*Oui, sire.*"

I was addressed in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, the Western European languages. One spoke to me in Sanskrit, another in Chinese, a third one in Japanese.

I understood that these men were assembled for the purpose of examining me. I answered each one, and every now and then, I turned to the monarch and related in German or in French, curious customs prevailing in those countries.

Frederick applauded. "You are a marvel, Prince. I do not understand how so young a man could acquire so much knowledge."

Voltaire grumbled. "Mere memory, Your Majesty."

Frederick laughed. "Do not mind Monsieur de Voltaire, Prince. He scorns every art in which he is not proficient. He says 'mere king' with equal glibness."

Voltaire grinned.

"The great Rousseau he calls—"

"A jackass," Voltaire interposed.

"The incomparable Shakespeare—"

"A barbarian."

"Homer—"

"A blind nurse woman putting her grandchildren to sleep with childish and monotonous stories."

"Corneille—"

"A pompous ass dragging a hearse."

"Michael Angelo—"

"The wooden horse of Troy."

There was much laughter and spilling of beer. The conversation turned to religion. I described the ceremonies of the African tribe. My auditors laughed. Frederick chuckled, now and then stroking his graceful hounds or looking into their eyes as if to find there the affection and understanding that he did not find among men.

"The trinity of the Africans is more intelligible than that of the Christians," Voltaire said, his face screwed to the size of a fist. "No Christian has the remotest conception of God. A poor Jewish lens grinder, Baruch Spinoza,

excommunicated by Jews and Gentiles alike, discovered Him by mathematics."

The cleric laughed.

"It is the truth!" Voltaire shouted, his voice cracking like a whip. "Spinoza whom people call an atheist was the only man who loved God—Spinoza and Voltaire, also called an atheist by the ignorant, which means by all."

"Monsieur de Voltaire," the cleric admonished, "you are blaspheming the Lord."

"The Lord, reverend father, will pardon me."

"What makes you think that God will pardon you?"

"Because that is His business."

The churchman rose incensed, waving his cup. *"Monsieur, vous êtes impertinent!"*

"Monsieur," Voltaire answered calmly, *"votre nez est convert de tabac. Mouchez-vous!"*

The ecclesiastic reseated himself, drew a red kerchief out of his pocket, and wiped his nose.

The king slapped his thighs and laughed.

There was a long silence. Suddenly, Frederick grasped his knee. "Ouch!"

Voltaire laughed. The others glared at him.

"Monsieur, is it proper to laugh at a monarch's predicament?"

"I am laughing at rheumatism which does not seem to discriminate between a royal knee and an old washerwoman's, Your Majesty."

"Monsieur would spend his life in the Bastille rather than avoid a witticism."

"The king allows freedom of mind and speech, *n'est-ce-pas?*" Voltaire rose and walked out, beating his leg with a short whip.

"If you are not careful, monsieur, the whip shall be in the hands of another, and the part struck shall be somewhat higher than your calf."

Voltaire remained at the door for a moment. "Your Majesty, here is the whip and here the part higher than my calf."

He turned his back to the King, bending forward.

"Cochon!" Frederick shouted, his voice a thin thread, *"ne te montre plus ici!"*

Voltaire walked out.

Frederick reseated himself. No one dared to utter a sound or make a comment.

"Let us have another drink and forget that French buffoon. His work will not outlive him a day."

All agreed. His philosophy was mere antics. His Majesty should command a good horsewhipping for him.

"If I did it, all Europe would rise in arms against me. His influence is tremendous and his tongue stings like a lash. Besides, somehow I like him. I do not know what attracts me to him. And he likes me too. Tomorrow, I shall get a letter from him—such a letter as no one but a witty Frenchman can write. He will tell me things that will split my sides with laughter. But this time, he must really go. He has been for nearly three years with me. Besides, that man has seduced half of the court women, including the servants and the coachmen's wives. *Cochon!* He faints every day, and every evening he is resurrected. He will live to be a hundred. He is the personification of France—hog, nightingale, and peacock. There is no country like France, gentlemen. I would give half my wealth if we could produce a Voltaire."

My stay at the Court of Frederick the Great was of a short duration. I had no intention to amuse His Majesty by my ability to speak many languages, tell ancedotes, or cure his rheumatism.

Elections in Poland were more turbulent than ever. The nobles could not decide upon a ruler. Frederick wished to reduce the noise and the danger by cutting a slice of the Polish kingdom. He needed money. His experiments in alchemy had proved futile and costly. My banks, less gaudy, but more substantial, supplied his needs.

Thenceforth Europe was firmly in my grasp.

"Kotikokura, we must leave Sans-Souci. There are still a few countries which I must capture. Then, I shall retire and watch the comedy. Ca-ta-pha is a gentle and peace-loving god. He will endeavor, whenever allowed by the cupidity and cruelty of man, to spread art and joy and wealth. It is probable, my friend, that his desire will be frustrated. It is also probable that people will blame him for their wars, and deny his peaceful pursuits. But that is unavoidable. Every crown is a crown of thorns. However, I shall be as cautious as possible, and the thorns shall not pierce too deeply."

Kotikokura grinned.

43. ROTHSCHILD MOVES TO PARIS — A FASHIONABLE SALON—THE GOD ENNUI — I RECEIVE A MYSTERIOUS INVITATION—THE GOLDEN BOY—HERMA—A GLIMPSE OF LILITH

Rothschild transferred his main office to Paris. Quietly, subtly, like a spider, he was weaving the intricate web to capture all Europe for me.

France was a wise and fortunate choice. The king and nobles were deeply in debt and ready to pay exorbitant interest for ready cash. The banks were in a dilapidated condition, requiring the hand of a genius for reconstruction.

Meanwhile, Mayer-Anselm proved as honest as he had promised to be. My money, nearly tripled, awaited me wherever I ordered, while my many names were never associated with that of Prince Daniel Petrovich, Member of Russian Royalty, scholar, linguist, traveler, and lover.

Kotikokura and I walked arm in arm along the shore of the Seine. The stars dipped their long fingernails into the cool waters of the river. One flat-bottomed barge emerged silently from under the bridge. A couple, their arms wound about each other's waist, bent over the rail and laughed.

"Spinoza was right, Kotikokura. The sea is our mother. From the sea we come. Into the sea we go. Everything changes. The water remains. Where is the Paris through which we rode triumphantly with that strange man whose

beard was a frozen cataract of amethysts? There is hardly a pile of stones, a bit of iron which is still intact. The Seine, however, flows on unconcerned."

Kotikokura nodded.

"And yet, is there so collossal a change? Are there not now as then houses, streets, men, women? Now as then people live by illusion. Then it was the philosopher's stone. Now it is reason. Always the futile search for happiness."

Kotikokura nodded.

"Then as now, a handful of people ruled the rest of the nation. Then as now, a few managed to live in luxury, while the rest tried to squeeze out of the hard and stony earth the milk of existence. Then as now, the poor hoped to become rich and the rich fought to retain their wealth. Nothing really changes, Kotikokura. Nothing is ever born. Nothing dies."

I looked at my watch.

"But we are late, Kotikokura. The Marquise is awaiting us. Her food will become unpalatable. A dinner is more important to a hostess than all the truths of life and death. She is right. We live by food and not by melancholy meditation, watching the stars dip their fingertips into rivers."

Madame la Marquise du Deffand bade me sit next to her. She placed her small ivory fan upon her lap and felt my face with both hands. They were delicate and white, but the knuckles had begun to assert themselves. She touched every part of my face and throat, lingering over my lips and forehead.

"Since I am blind, Prince, I have really begun to see faces. You are very handsome."

"Madame forces me to acknowledge the truth which I prefer to hear rather than to express."

She laughed a low guttural sound not unpleasant, but cheerless.

"You Russians learn the art of words so readily. You have much in common with us although it is not evident on the surface. But then, you have been in France before?"

"Long ago, Madame, in my youth."

The marquise laughed. "Long ago! How can you know the meaning of long ago, monsieur? But youth, of course, will draw voluptuous pleasure even out of such a thought,

however distasteful it may be to those really afflicted with age."

"How should madame know the distastefulness of age?"

She struck me lightly with her fan. "Flattery is always delicious—at my age."

"I insist, madame. You can have no conception of the meaning of age."

"Let me feel your lips, Prince."

She felt my lips with the tips of her fingers, perfumed with lavender.

"No," she said, "you do not grin. You are sincere."

Her face, half hidden in her velvet bonnet trimmed with lace, had, if not beauty, at least a daintiness and charm peculiar to so many French women. A few, thinly-drawn, almost imperceptible wrinkles danced about her eyes, tightly shut, and about her lips.

"I do not know what you may have heard about me, Prince. A blind person suspects every whisper."

"I have heard only praises—"

"I have not always done what I should have done—that is true. But monsieur, I was bored. I strove to evade the great god ennui."

I sighed. "Who has not been smothered by his terrible shadow, madame?"

"Your voice seems different, Prince. I should almost have believed it another man's. Strange! It sounded far, far off, thousands of miles—or perhaps, thousands of years. I was frightened."

"I spoke of the god ennui, madame. One should be realistic."

She bade me give her my hand which she pressed. "Let me whisper something into your ear."

I bent until her lips touched and pressed my ear.

"*Je vous adore.*"

I kissed her fingers.

Meanwhile, the salon became crowded with ladies and gentlemen. The hearing of Madame la Marquise was very acute.

"The man who is laughing now," she said, "is Monsieur d'Alembert, a fine genius but rather effeminate. Once," she sighed, "I thought I loved him. Youth—you know. The lady who speaks now is Madame d'Epinay. Beware of her, Prince! She smiles always, I remember,

but it is a false smile, I assure you. But then, it was a man's fault, as usual. Her husband, Monsieur de la Live, has hardened her heart. Had he only been a little more careful in his faithlessness—for it is not expected of a man to be a model of virtue. It is enough if one can betray with tact, and charm, and wit."

"Madame, every country has its own customs. Virtue is a matter of time and space. It partakes neither of infinity nor eternity. Charm, however, seems to prefer France for her habitation."

She whispered, "The lady who has just sneezed—she takes too much snuff at one time—is Madame Geoffrin, a splendid woman and as virtuous as it is compatible with politeness and humor." The marquise laughed a little. "*Mon ami,* come nearer, and I shall tell you a comical story about Madame Geoffrin."

I approached until our legs touched. I understood she desired more the proximity of my thigh than that of my ear. It amused me although the posture was slightly uncomfortable.

Mlle. de Lespinasse, tall, angular, with magnificent eyes and hair, bent and whispered into the ear of the Marquise. One or two other ladies approached. I took the opportunity to rise and walk away. Madame du Deffand motioned to me with her hand to remain, but I made believe I did not see. A little later, I saw her lips stretch into a painful grin. I, too, had disappointed her, I understood, and life was a bore.

The conversation drifted to politics. "Liberty—*canaille*—the king—equality—la France—treason" bombarded the room like a cannonade.

Madame Geoffrin walked among the people. "I beg you, gentlemen, no politics! Please, I beg you."

It was becoming very warm. The ladies nibbled at biscuits and fanned themselves, scattering about the scent of many perfumes and stale powder. The gentlemen consumed ices and wines.

"Your husband is a monster, madame, and you are an adorable creature," one man whispered to a woman. She struck him very gently over the mouth with the tip of her finger and after consulting her calendar, she breathed a date.

Other gentlemen whispered into other ladies' ears variations of the eternal formula.

I was bored. I suddenly felt my age. What had I to do among these children?

Some one pulled gently at the lace of my sleeve. I turned around. A young woman whom I had not noticed until then, whispered to me, "*Monsieur le prince s'ennuie, n'est-ce-pas?*"

I nodded.

"*Moi aussi.*"

I bowed politely.

"I am Herma," she said. "How shall I call you?"

"Call me Lucifer."

Her voice was deep and unsuited for her frail body. Her features were irregular but not unpleasant. Almost breastless and hipless in an age which insisted upon exposing its feminine charms, she appeared a pleasurable anomaly.

"Since monsieur is bored and since I am bored, would monsieur care to accompany me to my salon where he may find things and people to interest him?"

I looked at her, knitting my brow.

She smiled. "Monsieur need not fear. I do not mean to seduce him."

I smiled in my turn. "Mademoiselle would have no difficulty."

"The remark is a trifle banal."

"It is. Pardon." I gave her my arm. "I beg you to take me to your salon."

"We can leave here *à l'anglaise,*" she said.

"But my friend, the duke?"

"Do not worry about him, Prince. The ladies will take care of him and return him to you when no longer needed. He is perfectly safe."

"As mademoiselle commands."

Mademoiselle awoke the coachman, who was fast asleep.

"Home," she ordered.

Our journey was made in silence. I was grateful to the young woman. Every now and then, I glanced at her. There was something strange about her. A curve about her mouth and a soft down upon her upper lip reminded me of some one I could not name.

She had never been introduced to me and I was not

certain whether she knew more about me than the fact that I was a Russian prince who appeared bored.

The horses slackened their pace. We turned into the Boulevard du Temple.

"Mademoiselle," I said, as we alighted, "I am grateful to you for your silence. I was much in need of it, after the noise made by so many chatterboxes of either sex at Madame du Deffand's."

She smiled and nodded.

"My friend, Contessa di Rosacroce, who I hope will visit us tonight, believes that the male is the more garrulous of the species. Among animals and birds, she has discovered the same tendency."

"La contessa is very observant, mademoiselle."

"She is a marvelous woman, Prince. She has traveled the world over, knows many languages, and is remarkably beautiful." She sighed. "Ah, so beautiful, Prince!"

We had already climbed the steps that led to the door of the house. Mademoiselle raised the knocker, the shape of a coiled snake, and struck three times, slowly, then three times in quick succession.

The door opened.

"Has anybody arrived?" she asked the butler, a tall Negro dressed like an admiral.

"Not yet, mademoiselle."

"So much the better. Prince, are you interested in paintings?"

"Certainly."

"I have some canvasses which will please you, I hope."

We walked slowly from one painting to another, praising their merits, discussing the artists. My eye was arrested suddenly by a painting hanging in an adjoining room.

"Mademoiselle, may I examine that work—*là bas?*"

"Of course. An ancestor of mine. On my mother's side, I am Italian. It is for this reason, perhaps, that I have been attracted to Lilith."

"Who is Lilith?"

"La contessa. I call her Lilith. I imagine Lilith must have been like her—so beautiful, so wise, and—"

"So wicked, may I add?"

"Wicked!" she exclaimed. "Prince!"

"Pardon. How otherwise could Lilith be but beautiful, wise—and wicked?"

"Perhaps you are right, Prince. At least, she is very dangerous. I would not advise you to fall in love with her."

"I could not."

"Why not?"

I kissed her hand.

In a distant corner of the salon, I saw a marble statue gleaming in the soft candlelight.

"The god of love," she sighed. "Hermaphroditus."

I gazed musingly at the statue. Was this the goal of my long search, the double flower of passion, Mary and John, Antonio and Antonia, man and woman, in one?

I felt someone's presence in back of me. I turned around.

Mademoiselle gazed raptly at me. In the chiaroscuro of the place, she was no longer a woman. The delicate down upon her lip had grown darker. Her body assumed a man's contours . . .

"Who are you, mademoiselle?" I asked, bewildered.

"I am Herma, Lucifer, Hermaphrodita . . ."

She pressed my hand.

"The statue is the gift of Lilith. It represents—"

"You, Herma!"

"At times . . ."

A dozen emotions assailed me—hate, love, passion, disgust, disillusion, desire.

"Are you disappointed, Prince, to meet the sister of the son of Hermes and Aphrodite?"

"I am—*bouleversé.*"

"Lilith also—"

"Let me see you, Herma—in the light—here."

She had changed. Once more, she was a girl; once more Mona Lisa!

I grasped her head and pressed my lips against hers.

"Be careful, Prince," she admonished. "Lilith is jealous."

"What does she love in you, Hermes or Aphrodite?"

"Both."

"And you?"

"I love Lilith and Lucifer."

She rushed out of the room.

I seated myself on a chair, breathless. My head ached; my eyes burned as if hot sand had been thrown into them.

44. ASSORTED LOVERS—THE TRANSVESTITE—NARCISSUS-NARCISSA—THE ESOTERIC BARONESS — THE LOVER OF DREAMS—L'HOMME SERPENT—SHIFTING SEXES—QUEEN LILITH AND KING LUCIFER—GODS FOR A NIGHT—A MISSIVE FROM SALOME

HERMA tapped my shoulder.

"Lucifer, the salon is already filled. You must come in."

I stood up. "If you knew the multitude of memories that galloped through my brain, Herma, you would forgive my inattention."

"Lilith too speaks of memories—memories always. Both of you live in the past and yet you are still so young. Does not the present exist for you at all?"

"It exists now that I have discovered you."

"So she said," Herma sighed.

"Who?"

"Lilith. She has sent word she will be here later in the night. If only—" she looked at me sadly, her lips trembling.

"If only what, my dear?"

"If only I could have you both in one! Lilith—Lucifer! Ah, how much more fortunate you are!"

"Why?"

"I am—" she smiled—"both in one."

The salon was immense. The smell of incense, perfume, and tobacco gave a strange sensation of sensuality mingled with religious exaltation. It was as if kneeling at an altar, one thought of naked women, or if while embracing a woman, one had a vision of Jesus upon the cross.

The paintings on the wall, even the furniture, suggested something hovering between the two sexes.

Herma introduced me to the guests.

Monsieur le Chef de Police attired as a lady in a scarlet dress embroidered with silk, lisped compliments to my beauty.

"He lisps only when he visits me," Herma whispered into my ear. "You ought to see him on horseback in parades. He is magnificent."

"Mademoiselle Fifi," Herma said, pointing to a young dandy who was leaning against a column, "allow me to introduce you to Prince Lucifer."

Mademoiselle Fifi combed her heavy black beard with her fine sensitive fingers, whose long nails reminded me of a mandarin's.

"She was a charming girl. She has transformed herself into a man. I think she erred. As a man, she is too effeminate. . ."

A pale youth, dressed in the height of fashion, gazed at himself lovelorn in a tall mirror. He played with his locks, turning now to the right, now to the left.

"Whom do you love?" I asked.

"Myself," he said. "It is the oldest and the deepest of passions."

Near him a young girl threw kisses at herself in a glass. She never looked at the boy. He never looked at her. Each was too absorbed in the image cast back by the mirror. The girl did not look up when I addressed her. Her heavy-ringed eyes were fastened hungrily only upon her own reflection.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"I do not know," Herma answered. "We call her Narcissa."

We approached an elderly gentleman who knelt and kissed my shoes.

"How beautiful are feet encased in shoes!" he exclaimed. He rose. "Do you not think, Monsieur le Prince, that Eros had the shape of a shoe? *Le tout ensemble*, I mean. Not the particular. I have studied the nature of love, monsieur, all my life. Mademoiselle, would the Prince be interested in my book?"

Herma looked at me.

"*Nihil humanum—*"

He knelt again and kissed my feet.

"May I present monsieur with my shoes in exchange for his book?"

"I shall place them in a golden case, monsieur. I shall worship them as one worships a god."

"*Monsieur le Comte, vous vous trompez.* Eros is not a shoe but a flame," said a rosy-faced figure whose sex I could not determine.

"A flame in the shape of a shoe, monsieur."

"No monsieur. A flame in the shape of—"

We passed on.

"Baroness de Boncourt." Herma bowed. Even in her sitting posture, she was taller than I. Her hair was a deep violet.

"Baroness de Boncourt," Herma confided, "knows all the ways of love except one."

"Which is that?"

"The way in which Adam knew Eve." She whispered, "That enormous man who sits upon the floor, Turkish fashion, is Baron de Patrin. He preferred to be neither man nor woman in order to love mentally, undisturbed by the flesh or the whim of a partner, some pale wraith of his fancy. He is a capon. Some call him Fra Abelard. Alas, he has forgotten love entirely."

In the center of the room, upon a platform, was a wide armchair, gilded and surmounted by a crown.

Herma seated herself upon it and asked me to sit at her right. She raised a long ebony scepter, and majestically struck the floor three times.

"Mesdames et messieurs, the early part of this night we shall devote to the muse! Monsieur Michel Jean Sedaine, incomparable poet and playwright, will read his new masterpiece."

Monsieur Sedaine was applauded. He was followed by other men and women who recited madrigals and sonnets about love and passion.

Suddenly, Herma jumped off the throne. "La Reine Lilith, mesdames et messieurs!"

Like a resurrected queen of Egypt, dazzling with rare jewels, her eyes half shut, her mouth slightly pouting, her fingers outstretched and arms pressed against her sides, she entered, making small rhythmic steps.

Salome!

I jumped up.

She opened her eyes wide, looked at me, and dropped

her lids again. Behind her, two immense Negroes, naked to the waist, carried her train.

Herma knelt and kissed the hands of Salome. A harp, invisible, played one of the compositions that I had heard in the enchanted palace in Persia.

Salome seated herself.

"Your Majesty," Herma asked, "shall the inspired ones continue their reading?"

"Yes."

Herma called upon another poet. She seated herself upon a golden stool at the feet of the queen. I remained standing.

"Salome," I whispered while the recitation proceeded, "my supreme, my incomparable love, have you forgotten Cartaphilus?"

She made no answer but patted the head of Herma who assumed, under her touch, a masculine personality.

"Salome," I continued, "do not torture Cartaphilus as you tortured him in the palace of Pilate."

"Herma," Salome whispered, "you are very beautiful tonight."

"Salome, what have we in common with these people? Are they not mere dust? We are the eternal flame that the stars are made of," I said.

Salome's eyes were riveted upon the slim body of Herma. "Herma," she chanted, "you are not of the earth. You are the daughter-son of Hermes and Aphrodite. The nymph Salmacis is united with you, making one. . . ."

I touched Herma's small breasts with my arm. Under my touch Herma assumed a feminine aspect. Her breast buds swelled and throbbed.

Salome looked at her, and her breast blossoms withered. Herma was a boy.

Herma looked at both of us. One side of her face was a woman's, the other a man's. She took both our hands and said: "Queen Lilith—King Lucifer—one—eternally one."

Had she guessed our relationship? I looked at Salome imploringly. She smiled vaguely and pressed my hand.

Salome stood up. "King Lucifer shall improvise a dialogue in verse with Queen Lilith."

I was startled. I had always considered poetry the consolation of those who were incapable of living intensely.

"Life is a greater poem than mere sounds, dexterously

arranged, Your Majesty," I said. "King Lucifer has lived."

Salome exclaimed: "The queen has spoken, sire."

"So be it, then! The king obeys provided the queen responds. Let the lyre play!"

I knelt upon one knee and began to improvise a poem in the somewhat theatrical mood of Herma and her guests. Salome, as Lilith, responded in the same mood.

LUCIFER

"Lady of mystery, what is thy history?
Where is the rose God gave to thee,
Where is thy soul's virginity?"

LILITH

"Lord, my Lord, is thy speech a sword?
What is it thou wouldst have of me?"

LUCIFER

"There are pleasant passes of tender grasses
Where the kine may browse and the wild she-asses,
Between the hills and the deep salt sea,
But where is the spot that is branded not
With the sign of the Beast on thy fair body?"

LILITH

"Lord, my Lord, ask thy Scarlet Horde!
Who spilt my love and my life like wine?
Who threw my body as bread to swine?
If my sins in heaven be seventy times seven,
What between heaven and hell are thine?"

LUCIFER

"Lady, where is it thy fancies hover,
With wolves' eyes prying restlessly
For some naked thing that they might discover,
Some strange new sin or some strange new lover,
Beyond the lover who lies with thee?"

LILITH

"Lord, my Lord, who has struck the chord
That holds my heart in a spider's mesh?
Prince of the soul's satiety,
Whence springs that hunger beyond the flesh,
That only the flesh can appease in me?"

LUCIFER

"By the love of a love that is strange as myrrh,
By the kiss that kills and the doom that smileth,
By thy cloven hoof and my fiery spur,
Thou art my sister, the Lady Lilith,
I am—"

LILITH

"My brother—Lucifer!"

LUCIFER

"I am thy lover, I am thy brother,
Time cannot prison us, space cannot smother,
Proudest of Jahveh's kindred we,
Whom Chaos, the terrific mother,
Begot from stark Eternity.

"I am the cry of the earth that beguileth
God's trembling hosts though they loathe my name,
The dauntless foe of His loaded game!
But where is the tomb that had hidden Lilith,
Of the Deathless Worm and the Quenchless Flame?

"I hunted thee where the Ibis nods,
From the Brocken's crag to the Upas Tree,
My lonesomeness was as great as God's
When He cast us out from His Holy See,
But now at the last thou art come to me!

"Let Mary of Bethlehem lord it in Heaven,
While stringed beads her seraphs tell,
(How art thou fallen, Gabriel!)
Thy bridesmaids shall be the Deadly Seven,
And I will make thee a queen in Hell!"

When we finished, Herma wept.

Salome kissed her upon one cheek, and I upon the other.

"You are gods. I am but a mortal," she sighed. "No matter! Tonight we shall be gods."

Herma rang a large gold bell that hung against the wall. Servants appeared with drinks and pipes filled with hashish.

"Drink and smoke, mesdames et messieurs. Man becomes a god only by intoxication."

"Come nearer me, Lucifer," Herma asked. "Let my body be your pillow this night. This night I too shall be a goddess."

"Hermaphroditus—Hermaphrodita—eternal god-goddess!" I exclaimed.

"Dance!" Herma commanded.

An invisible orchestra played.

The guests began to dance—strange unrhythmical dances. In the smoke that rose from their pipes, they assumed grotesque and unhuman shapes. One man whom I had not seen until then, dressed in a red veil, turned about himself, twisted, rolled upon the floor.

"The human serpent," Herma informed me. "He knows the love of all animals and birds and even insects. He has discovered sixty-seven new ways of love, possible, alas, only to one who, like him, can twist himself like a serpent."

"Does he also know," I inquired tantalizingly, "the secret of unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged?"

Herma looked at me, startled. She pressed my hand in a curious way which I assumed to be the secret grip of a strange lodge.

"Salome, am I once more in Persia? Are you deluding me again? Are these phantoms cast against mirrors?"

"Cartaphilus is a child always, and always bewildered," Salome answered in Greek.

"You speak the language of the gods," Herma said wearily, her eyes closed. Her lips assumed the smile of La Joconda.

My eyes became dim. The lights danced among the dancers who seemed motionless. The music retreated.

I felt warm flesh pressing against mine. Herma lay between Salome and me.

"Salome," I whispered, my words coming into my mouth from an immense distance, "Salome!"

"Cartaphilus!"

"Must always a dream or another human form, however lovely, interfere between Salome and Cartaphilus?"

"When Salome conquers the moon—Cartaphilus shall conquer Salome."

Something beat against my ear like a bass drum. I opened my eyes wide, wide, for fear they would close again.

It was morning. The sun pierced vainly through the curtained windows. All about me, men and women snored and groaned or lay still, like dead. Herma slept, her face bloated, her lips frozen into an ironic grin. Salome was gone!

Some one was knocking furiously at the door. No one moved. The servants had disappeared. I rose, tottered to the door, and opened it.

Kotikokura, wild-eyed, his sword drawn, was ready to strike.

"Kotikokura!" I exclaimed.

"Ca-ta-pha!" His sword dropped. "Ca-ta-pha!" He embraced me.

"This is the enchanted palace of Persia, Kotikokura."

He took me in his arms like a child and placed me in a carriage. I fell asleep. When I awoke again, Kotikokura administered cognac and iced oranges.

"What has happened, Kotikokura? Where have I been?"

He explained that he suddenly became aware that I had disappeared from the salon of the marquise. Nobody had seen me go. He shouted: "Where is Ca-ta-pha, god Ca-ta-pha?" Everybody laughed. He rushed out, upsetting several men and women. He looked for me at the hotel and at the cafés—everywhere indeed where I was accustomed to go. He feared foul play. He had heard of spies and kidnappers. He rushed about the streets, calling out: "Ca-ta-pha! Ca-ta-pha!" He stopped carriages, peered into windows, and finally returned to the hotel. I had disappeared! Meanwhile, day was breaking. He was desperate and commenced to search once more.

Finally, a lady, heavily veiled, stopped him, and pointed out the house where I was.

"It was Salome!" I exclaimed.

His jaw dropped.

A lackey brought in a letter.

"From Salome, Kotikokura."

Mon cher Lucifer,

Kotikokura, the most faithful of creatures, must have taken care of you. Do you remember anything as grotesque as last night? *Mon ancien, mon ami!* Do not remain very long in Paris. The storm is rising. It is not safe.

Before leaving, however, see Dr. Benjamin Franklin, inventor, publicist, statesman, and possessor of twenty-seven mistresses and several illegitimate children, which is not a mean record for a representative of a new country.

Help him carry on the revolution. It may be that the New World will be a more habitable place than the old one. I doubt it, but let us try. Besides, you will lose nothing. Your banking system is splendidly organized. Rothschild is very clever. You have chosen well.

Poor Herma! When she wakes up, she will find neither you nor me. A god-goddess for one night. But what a god—what a goddess, Cartaphilus!

I am leaving for the Pampas, where I hope to create a more perfect being than Herma. I shall communicate with you as soon as I wish you to visit me. Meanwhile, take care of yourself and of your charming monster.

Lilith, Regina.

I remained pensive. I could not remember the embraces of Herma. Had I foregone godly pleasure?

"Kotikokura! Oh, that we may never find what we seek!"

He helped me descend from the bed.

"I am sick, Kotikokura."

He gave me another cool drink.

45. THE GARDEN OF SALOME HOMUNCULI —A CENTURY IN RETROSPECT—ADVENTURES IN THE NEW WORLD—THE WOMB OF CREATION—A SIMIAN ABELARD—I PLAY CHESS—THE BLACK KING AND THE RED KING—THE LAST INGREDIENT—ULTIMATE MEANINGS

Salome was standing at the tall bronze gate, waving her hand. In the reflection of the setting sun, she dazzled like a luminous body—a lake on fire or a full moon surrounded by a magnificent aureole.

"Gallop faster, Kotikokura, or she will disappear. She is Fata Morgana."

We shipped and urged our horses and in our haste, we drove past her. Salome laughed, and ran a little to meet us. She embraced me, pressing me tightly to her breast. She took our arms and led us back to the gate of her inaccessible dominion. Meanwhile, a host of men and women whose faces were hidden by their enormous sombreros, ran from all sides, took care of our horses, and rushed to meet the long caravan which was approaching slowly.

"What is that, Cartaphilus?" Salome asked.

"My belongings and my gifts to the incomparable queen."

She looked at me, a little perplexed.

"I have come to stay, Salome. The Wandering Jew must have a spot to call his own in this twentieth century. He has exhausted all countries. The Zeppelin and the airplane make a jest of distance. I shall stay here for a century, perhaps forever."

"Don't be too sanguine," she said, pressing my arm.

The gate opened wide at our approach. A burly individual bowed to the ground.

In the center of the garden, a tall fountain rose and fell softly, like a long whip that strikes caressingly the back of a cherished animal. In the basin, black swans glided shadowlike. Peacocks spread their tails and followed their mistress, reflections of her magnificence. Upon the tall palm trees, small monkeys rushed up and down, screaming. A gigantic tortoise whose back glittered as a strangely polished jewel, moved imperceptibly, its head shaking like a silent bell.

I looked about, bewildered.

"Child," Salome said, stroking gently my cheek, "you fear it is illusion again."

"You always guess my thoughts."

"No, this it not Persia—and what you see is reality."

"So it seemed to me then."

"This time you need not fear," she assured me.

We entered the palace, a building massive and yet graceful, practical, solid. Here and there, however, were touches of daintiness that bespoke the nature of the owner. A strange mixture of freshness and antiquity pervaded the place which, instead of giving the impression of incongruity, suggested a beautiful harmony, as if time had merely removed the glare and blatancy characteristic of newness, but left all the freshness. I thought of an aged tree whose leaves had the tender greenness of saplings.

Salome ordered two servants to undress us and help us with our bath.

In a cool corner of the garden, shaded by willow trees and rose bushes, the cool soft waters of a lake noiselessly splashed their artificial banks.

After our ablution in the lake, we were anointed with oils and perfumes as in the time of the kings of Israel, and were offered silken robes, and satin slippers studded with jewels.

I thought of the glory of Salome rising out of the waters, more fragrant than the roses that hid her from view.

Dinner had meanwhile been prepared and the table spread in a ten-column portico. Kotikokura preferred to eat with the major-domo. I was not displeased, for I wished to be alone with Salone.

A youth and a young girl whose skin was as smooth and as black as ebony, dressed in silken garments emphasizing the suppleness of their limbs, waited upon us.

We reclined on opposite sides of the table on couches, Roman fashion, eating delicate but simple foods, and drinking, out of exquisitely chiseled goblets, wines and liqueurs that sparkled like molten jewels. At a distance, some one played the lute. The music mingled with the perfume of many flowers and the singing of birds.

"Salome, this is paradise, and only a god as cruel and as jealous as Yahweh shall drive me out of it." Salome smiled. "My servants believe that you are my bridegroom, come to wed me."

"Oh lovely Salome, beautiful and radiant, be indeed my bride!"

"Salome belongs to an old generation. She may not believe in divorce."

"Have not nearly two thousand years proved the constancy of Cartaphilus? Why, there are stars that are less—"

"Pesistent," she interrupted.

"The ancient order of geometry is overthrown by the new mathematics. Two parallel lines may meet long before infinity," I said, and raising my glass, I continued: "Here is to Einstein—greatest of mathematicians!"

We descended several steps. A gate opened and closed behind us automatically. We were surrounded at once by high stone walls, surmounted by an immense glass dome.

"Where are we, Salome?"

"The new Garden of Eden in which I fashion a different world."

I touched a rose. It curled its petals until it assumed the shape of a red-furred cat. Out of its pistil or muzzle—I could not tell which—jutted a thin stream of perfume. I retreated before what seemed a leopard, glaring at me. The leopard unfolded into a vast dahlia. Peacocks' tails were the leaves of a palm tree. A butterfly, waving its wings, was a carnation of the loveliest hue. A bud that Salome offered me assumed the shape of a bee, the tips of its leaves buzzing. Out of chalices of flowers, birds sang exquisite music. Out of birds' beaks hung branches, laden with fruit. Lizards, many-colored, grew like micro-

scopic trees. The animal world merged with the plant; perfumes mingled with color; leaves were incipient wings; songs approached human voice.

"Taste of this, Cartaphilus."

Salome offered me an apple. I bit into it. A sensation of nakedness overcame me. I looked at myself.

She smiled. "This is my Tree of Knowledge."

"Does knowledge mean nakedness?" I asked.

"Life is overdressed. Knowledge is the tearing of veils."

"Salome! I am like a man who has been swung about many times and is set upon the ground suddenly. Everything turns. Be good enough to explain things to me, O marvelous Queen!"

"It is very simple. I am weary of the earth. She is the most monotonous of mothers. Always she bears the same children. Her patterns are unvarying, like the knitting of a senile woman. I am the new mother! I shall create newer and more beautiful things! I shall change the dull face of life. . . . But greater and more resplendent than all things created shall be my new humanity."

"New humanity?"

"My Homuncula is nearly completed."

My thoughts reverted to Bluebeard.

"No, not the Homunculus of that strange man whom I inspired, but whose masculine lack of creativeness shaped a ridiculous monster."

I looked at her, expecting to see the crazy glint of Bluebeard's eyes. But the eyes of Salome were as cool as the shadows of the roses.

"Is anyone interested in a new humanity in Europe or in America, Cartaphilus?"

"The last one who mentioned it was Goethe, the German poet. I visited him at the termination of the French Revolution, which broke out, as you surmised, not long after your departure. Alas, he was as garrulous as an old woman and much more interested in the medal which Napoleon had pinned upon his chest and court intrigues than in Homunculus."

"Homuncula, Cartaphilus. It would be futile to create a man!" Salome exclaimed. "Is the New World different from Europe?"

"The New World, *ma très chère*, imitates the old. It has copied its vices perfectly and its virtues clumsily."

"Ah, by the way, did you see Dr. Benjamin Franklin,

Cartaphilus, as I suggested in my letter? What sort of man was he?"

"He looked like a debauched woman, was as practical as a Jewish peddler, had the imagination of a dray horse, uttered advices like a successful grocer—except once." I laughed. "He told me not to get married, but choose an elderly lady for a companion. It was cheaper, safer, her body was generally much younger than her face, and above all, she was grateful!"

Salome laughed. "Rather clever. And did you give him the money?"

"Certainly. But it was a bad investment. The Americans were so inconceivably sentimental that they considered a debt incurred for the sake of their liberty in the nature of a gift. The politicians could not conceive that any man desired to recover his money after such a splendid victory and the establishment of a democracy. I did not insist. America appeared as too profitable a field for future investments. Indeed, at present, I rule the world from the world's new center—New York."

"Vanity, thy name is Cartaphilus!" she exclaimed.

Kotikokura reclined underneath a palm tree. Half a dozen monkeys were playing about him. He began to play on his flute. The monkeys made a circle about his feet and listened, enraptured. The peacocks approached, spreading their tails. Small birds alighted and remained motionless. The swans stretched their necks opening and shutting their bills. A squirrel, his tail in the air, dropped the nut which he had held in his forepaws, and did not budge. The tortoise approached, its head in the air like a priest at prayer. Several servants emerged from various parts of the house, open-eyed and open-mouthed. The major-domo stood in the distance, his large hands upon his enormous belly, his flat feet beating time.

Salome appeared. "Today you shall see the Homuncula, Cartaphilus," she whispered. "Come."

We walked through corridors, halls, rooms, turned in strange mazes, climbed and descended stairs.

"Why the secrecy, *ma chère*?" I ventured to ask.

"Is it not self-evident, my friend? I have been at work for a century and a half. A stupid servant, an over-curious guest might annul my labors. You are the only person who will see the Homuncula."

"I am grateful for your confidence, Salome."

"You and I, are we not the sole gods of the world, the sole survivors of the tempest of time?"

She opened the door to a vast room which, contrary to the habitation of Bluebeard's Homunculus, was scented with strange and delicious perfumes. A garden blossomed out of the walls and ceiling. In the center, a magnificent statue lay outstretched upon a couch.

"My Homuncula," Salome said proudly.

"Salome is greater than Phidias."

"Art, Cartaphilus, is but child's play. Homuncula lives!"

"Of what material is she fashioned?"

"The essence of flesh."

I looked at her, perplexed.

"You cannot understand it, Cartaphilus. I have discovered strange things."

I approached the Homuncula. Salome held my arm. "Do not stir, Cartaphilus. You must not go near her. Watch from a distance. Look. Is she not made for pleasure such as even you and I have not experienced?"

"She resembles Herma," I remarked.

"But Herma—poor human child—was neither man nor woman completely. My Homuncula is both, perfectly. Every atom of her body is constructed for joy. Jahveh, in His hurry, created man for the purpose of living merely. Pleasure was only an impetus toward existence. It was not life's very purpose. Mind, too, was merely a substitute for deficient muscle. Man was mud, electrified. My Homuncula is of the very essence of life. Death cannot overcome her. Therefore she will be able to devote herself to joy with abandon! My Homuncula will not know the ugliness and travail of bearing children."

"How, then—"

"Why were the birds favored by Jahveh? Why cannot man be born like the bird?"

"Will the descendants of Homuncula be both man and woman?" I asked.

"Of course. 'Male *and* female created He them.' How can they know perfect joy save by being both man and woman? Jahveh reserved this double boon for the snail. I give it to the creature I have fashioned, not for my pleasure, but for her own. But we have remained here too long, Cartaphilus. We may disturb subtle biochemical processes. Homuncula is not yet entirely alive."

Salome was feeding the swans. They placed their flat bills in her hand and wound their necks about her wrist.

"Cartaphilus, has America produced any people worthy of consideration?"

"The American man," I laughed. "His history is divided into three chapters—he is successively the slave of his mother, of his wife, and of his daughter. The American man? Salome, even the most zealous feminist would be inspired with pity. The African tribe over which you ruled, *ma chère,* has been transplanted to the New World."

"I am right, Cartaphilus—the earth must be populated with a new race. The descendants of Adam are intolerable in whatever continent we place them."

"There are still a few men here and there, Salome, whose existence compensates for the ugliness and stupidity and cruelty of the rest."

"You are the eternal optimist, Cartaphilus."

"In England, there is George Bernard Shaw, a white-headed Lucifer, witty and wise. He believes that if man willed intensely to live, he could prolong his life indefinitely."

"Truly, I must hurry with my Homuncula before the children of Jahveh discover the secret of longevity," Salome interposed.

"In England, also, I met a man by the name of Havelock Ellis—the purest intellect since Apollonius, whom he resembles save that the beautiful dark eyes of the Greek have become a magnificent blue. He lives as simply as Spinoza. He has written as no man before him of the delights of sex. If such a man lived for a thousand years—"

"We cannot populate the earth with a handful of men."

"Then there are a few Jews who have revolutionized the torpid mind of man. Einstein has rediscovered and amplified my law of relativity, Freud has reinterpreted the meaning of immortality . . ."

"How?"

"Within our subconscious minds, we carry our own history and maybe the history of the race."

"That is not a new conception. In Greece, and in India, I knew several philosophers who held similar ideas."

"Freud has given life a new face. He teaches man to know himself without being ashamed of himself."

Salome shook off the particles of bread that clung to

her fingertips and taking my arm, we walked slowly between the rows of palm trees.

"In Switzerland, I met a man by the name of Lenin—a strange being, a Russian nobleman. He was a veritable volcano. If this man ever seizes the reins, the world will certainly accelerate its rotation."

"In what way?"

"There will be neither slaves nor masters, neither rich nor poor, neither—"

Salome laughed. "It is inconceivable, Cartaphilus, how a man who has lived for nearly two thousand years can still harbor such youthful illusions. How many messiahs have we not seen and heard! Truly your glands must function with the accuracy of a clock."

We laughed.

"No, *cara mia,* only a new superhumanity deserves our consideration."

"I remember once some years ago, I met a scholar and a poet whose name was—let me see—Nietzsche, of course. A great poet and a great scholar. He lived alone upon the top of a hill—a thin, sickly individual with an enormous head. He spoke in ditherambs, like an Athenian god. 'Superman! Superman! A new humanity!' I asked him: 'But master, if at last the superman appears in truth, what joy will it be to us men? The superman will lock us in cages and exhibit us to the youthful superman as we exhibit the monkeys. What delight is there in being an inferior animal?'

"He rubbed his forehead and covered his eyes, which could not withstand the light of the sun. 'Overcome yourself! Go beyond good and evil! Beyond life! Beyond death!' he exclaimed."

"Nietzsche understood, Cartaphilus. He understood the meaning of creation!" Salome exclaimed. "I should have met him. I shall accomplish what he hoped. I shall mother the superman and the superwoman."

"Salome, you are the eternal mother. This enables you to visualize your dream. You love the child before it is born. You create him mentally before he is created in truth. But I am the eternal father. I must learn to love my progeny. The child must exist before it can gain my affection."

"Perhaps that is true, Cartaphilus," Salome said thoughtfully.

"It is for this reason, no doubt, that I prefer the great men who are already alive to the supermen who dwell in the poet's brain, or the homunculae in the womb of creation."

Kotikokura, arm in arm with the major-domo, passed us, followed by the tortoise whose efforts at speed were a pity to behold, and two monkeys who jumped like drunken grasshoppers. The procession made us laugh. I related Kotikokura's adventure in the salon of Madame du Deffand.

"He is becoming more and more human," Salome remarked.

"Perhaps he is the superman of the future. Who knows to what mental stature he will grow within the next ten thousand years?"

"It is not such a wild notion as it may seem, Cartaphilus. He grows slowly. That is a good sign. We grew too rapidly. What difference is there between Cartaphilus and Salome in the time of Pilate and now? At most, a mellowing, a ripening, a tolerant outlook."

"Is not all this a dream, Salome? Have we really lived as many centuries as it seems to us? Have we not, by some strange mathematics, calculated days as years?"

Salome sighed a little.

"I have not visited the Garden of Eden today. Will you accompany me?" she asked.

"If I seem to walk, Salome, it is an illusion. I am flying. My feet have turned into wings."

She pressed my arm. "Come, Cartaphilus."

The Garden of Eden had a different complexion. Colors, sounds, perfumes had changed.

"When at last my experiment proves successful," Salome exclaimed, "the earth shall not be the monotonous singsong of an old woman which it is today. It shall be the mad dance of a young girl who—"

She was interrupted by a shrill cry.

"Let us see what has happened, Cartaphilus," she said anxiously.

In a corner of the garden, a small monkey was rolling in agony upon the ground. A gigantic carnivorous rose released its grip over the animal and resumed its normal posture. Blood dripped out of its chalice, reddened the long powerful stalk.

"A simian Abelard, paying his sanguine tribute to a floral Héloise," I suggested.

Salome wavered between indignation and amusement. "There is no reason, *ma bien aimée*, why a monkey may not turn monk, and why a rose—possessor of a *relique précieuse*—may not compose immortal letters in the shape of magnificent perfume."

"It would be a delight to see Cartaphilus a monk," Salome said, her voice slightly irritable. "You are incorrigible! Pick up the little victim."

"He is immoral, Salome. I am surprised you pity him. The rose in her virginal purity—"

"Stop chattering, Cartaphilus. Let us carry him out and see if we can save his life."

"Come, my poor little monk! What business did you have in the Garden of Eden anyway? Only snakes luxuriate in such places. Had you read the Bible faithfully, you—"

"I do not understand how he got in here," Salome remarked.

"He must have strayed between your lovely feet, Salome. He is thoroughly wicked, I assure you—or at least, he was. For the sake of his immortal soul, nothing better could have happened to him, for nothing is half so productive of moral habits as the inability to be immoral."

We walked quickly out of the garden. The monkey groaned in my arms.

Kotikokura appeared.

"Kotikokura, my ancient friend, I bring you a sinner permanently repentant."

He took the monkey in his arms. The animal stopped moaning, and licked Kotikokura's face. Kotikokura's eyes filled with tears. . . .

"Kotikokura, watch this move closely. It is a most excellent one."

Kotikokura bent his head until he nearly touched the board. I slowly raised one of the pawns, carved out of amber, and painted red, and placed it a square forward.

"A simple move, Kotikokura, and apparently without consequences. Moreover, because of it, the red castle is lost to the black queen. Ah, but watch!"

Kotikokura knit his brow, his eyes darting to and fro.

Salome, dressed in a Japanese kimono dazzling with

many jewels, and carrying a parasol upon which was embroidered a magnificent eagle, wings outspread, approached, making tiny steps.

"The queen! The queen!" I exclaimed. "Kneel, Kotikokura!"

"Do not let me disturb you, Cartaphilus. Continue your game."

"This is more than a mere game of chess, *carissima*. I am planning in an objective manner, my last, my most daring, most comprehensive campaign."

"And what is this most daring, most comprehensive campaign, if I may ask?"

"The civilized world is divided sharply into two camps—capital and labor. Labor, which you remember as a cringing slave, has risen to the grandeur of a monarch. The struggle between the two forces will be a grandiose spectacle, out of which labor, the red king, will emerge triumphant!"

"Why so enthusiastic, Cartaphilus? Are you a workman, anxious to increase your wages?" Salome asked ironically.

"I wish to be the leader of the force which must conquer. I have become accustomed to lead—to own the world. I prefer not to be the deposed sovereign."

"And should labor, contrary to your expectation, be defeated?"

"Then I shall play with the black king. Whatever happens, I win. My rule is permanent. There are not, as Disraeli intimated to me, two hundred men who rule the world. There is only one! The two hundred men are my agents. Many partnerships, many aliases and corporations conceal my identity." I laughed.

"I cannot understand your interest in the old world, Cartaphilus, but I am not opposed to your campaign which will, no doubt, mean the depopulation of the earth. It will make room for my new race, the descendants of Homuncula."

"Such a war as I am planning is beyond man's imagination. You are right, Salome. Blood will rise in great billows, like an ocean whipped by a storm. I have already chosen my tools. Lenin, an aristocrat—this red king—shall be the monarch of labor. Mussolini, a man of the people—this black king—the monarch of capital. Both are renegades. Renegades are the most passionate upholders

of their new ideas. But first of all, another king—the white king must be crushed!"

"Who is the white king?"

"The greatest potentate of Europe. Favoring neither capital nor labor, he aims to speak for both, and for his people. I must destroy him. I have no hatred against this scion of Charlemagne, but he threatens my rule."

"Why indulge in such childish notions of glory, Cartaphilus!" Salome exclaimed.

"But, O peerless woman, love me, and with one gesture —like this—I shall fling to the earth empires, emperors, continents!"

I swept the board with my palm, and knelt.

Kotikokura dropped the parasol and gathered the pieces.

Salome was sitting in the sun, drying her hair. I approached. Kotikokura followed me, carrying a golden box.

I knelt upon one knee. "Nymph celestial, your earthly lover has a gift for you. Accept it, I pray!"

Kotikokura placed the box upon her lap. Salome opened it and uttered an exclamation of joyous surprise.

"The crown and jewels, O Salome, that Isabella of Spain once wore. I bought them that America might be discovered. America has been discovered and inhabited —and corrupted. No other head in all the world save yours, O love, deserves to wear this precious ornament."

Salome's eyes closed halfway.

"Aphrodite was never as delectable as Salome. Goddess of beauty, you are Eros and Aphrodite in one," I exclaimed, rising and placing the crown upon her head.

The major-domo and all the servants came running from various parts of the garden.

I knelt again and all the rest followed suit. Salome rose and embraced me passionately. Her lips had the freshness of early morning.

"My love," she whispered.

She clapped her hands. The major-domo approached and lowered his head.

"A banquet in honor of my bridegroom!" she commanded.

The major-domo whistled. The servants scurried about like ants. Kotikokura walked away slowly. Was he downcast, or too moved to congratulate me?

"Salome, you said bridegroom—not husband. Was it intentional?" I asked.

"Yes, Cartaphilus. Today we shall celebrate our marriage, but we must postpone its consummation."

"Salome," I pleaded, "how long shall my lips parch in the desert of my desire?"

"Tomorrow, or as soon as you can arrange it, you must leave, Cartaphilus."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, you must leave for Europe again. Steinach, in Vienna, you tell me, has isolated the feminine hormone. I need this hormone. I need other endocrine products from his laboratory. Homuncula can never be truly born without perfectly balanced internal secretions. And there is one more ingredient which I lack to complete my conquest of the moon."

"I am stunned—"

"If I can achieve my end without the ingredient, or if I can isolate the hormone in my own laboratory, I shall send you a message. You will know that I have emancipated myself and my sex completely from ancient biological fetters. When I am free, I shall be yours."

"You are the creature predicted by Apollonius, the goal of man's passionate pilgrimage. I seek neither Mary nor John, but you, the synthesis of all sex attraction, the perfect double blossom of passion! Hermaphroditus and Hermaphrodita are monsters: you are the ultimate, the unimaginable ideal!"

"Homuncula's charms are more seductive than mine."

"Homuncula knows neither suffering nor struggle. Her perfection is a gift from you. You have wrung your perfection out of the hands of the gods. However marvelous she may be, you and I, though immortal, belong to the race of men. We are united by indissoluble memories, by immemorial ties."

Salome's eyes moistened. "When I am ready I shall send my messenger. You will know by this token that the two parallel lines of our lives have intersected at last. Come back to me then, the only man who ever captured his dream."

"After two thousand years!"

"Two thousand years is little time for man to discover himself, for woman to shake off the yoke imposed upon her by the biological accident when the first man and

the first woman first crept up from the slime of the sea."

"I shall obey, most desirable of your sex, or rather, of the new sex for which the world has not yet invented a name."

"When you are in Europe, execute your audacious game. Start your war, move your pawns, save the world if you can! If the experiment ends in failure and confusion, come back to me. A new creation awaits you here."

The train dashed on noisily like a whipped animal. Kotikokura and I smoked cigarettes in silence.

"Kotikokura, do you bear me a grudge for being betrothed to the most perfect of women?"

He shook his head.

"Does not your master deserve a little rest after nearly two thousand years of wandering and disillusion?"

He nodded sleepily.

"If only I can get those ingredients—or if Salome can distill the elixir of life without them. I am once more a heart-hungry boy!"

Kotikokura yawned.

"We must try to understand her, Kotikokura. She is the eternal mother."

"Ca-ta-pha eternal god."

"And Kotikokura eternal friend. We are the perfect triangle, the meaning of ultimate truth. I have discovered nothing else in twenty centuries. . . ."

We lit fresh cigarettes.

"Life is so simple and its essence is love!"

Kotikokura dozed.

"I have taught wisdom and happiness in every corner of the world, before I discovered this secret. But that digger of ditches who, for one fraction of a second, waved his red handkerchief to us, may have discovered it likewise. Wisdom and happiness are attitudes, not realities. This is a truism and a platitude, Kotikokura. But no truth has reached perfection unless it has become a truism and a platitude, an axiom incontrovertible and beyond explanation. Before that, truth is an epigram, the tour de force of a poet or a philosopher. And this too is a platitude. . . ."

Kotikokura's eyes blinked painfully.

"Yet this, too, is a matter of mood. Love may hide from us the truth of heaven and earth. Hate, the struggle for

survival, may be the sole compass of reality, Kotikokura."

Kotikokura grinned feebly.

"But how shall a man in love think if not platitudinously, seeing that love itself is the quintessence of all platitudes? Perhaps Cartaphilus will lose his own soul, if he returns to his mate. Perhaps the great God ennui will prevail in the end. Perhaps, to escape from his clutches, we must migrate to another planet."

Kotikokura snored.

I lit another cigarette.

The smoke that wound and unwound, like some strange and occult sculptor, shaped the face of my love.

"All is vanity save love."

The smoke rose to the ceiling, curled about the electric bulbs, and vanished.

"Love, too, is vanity."

Kotikokura gnashed his teeth in his sleep.

"And the truth of all things is—irony."

III

EPILOGUE

MOUNT ATHOS

1. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ISAAC LAQUEDEM

It was early morning. Father Ambrose, his cross swinging about his neck, a pair of shoes in one hand and in the other two telegrams, ran breathlessly toward the wing of the monastery in which Professor Basil Bassermann and Dr. Aubrey Lowell were quartered.

At the door of Professor Bassermann's room he placed the shoes upon the floor and rapped nervously. The professor, already dressed, opened.

"What makes you so matinal, Father? As for me, I could not sleep the whole night through. There was something restless in the air."

Father Ambrose stared at him. "I too found it impossible to sleep, and when I did I had the wildest dreams."

"Our experiments are very fatiguing, Father. We should take a rest for a few days."

The door of Aubrey's room opened and the young scientist appeared.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Up so early, too? I could not sleep and thought of taking a walk."

Father Ambrose crossed himself. "What a fool man is, gentlemen, and how little he understands the hidden meaning of things! During the last half-hour of my restless sleep, I dreamt continually of wings flapping and enormous gates opening and closing. It was a warning."

"A warning of what?" questioned Aubrey.

Father Ambrose pointed to the shoes. "Isaac Laquedem and his valet Kotikokura are gone!"

Professor Bassermann smiled sarcastically.

"Have you looked everywhere?"

"Everywhere. The only things he left us are this pair of shoes and these two telegrams which, in my excitement, I have not even read. It's incredible!"

All three bent over, their brows knit.

"What can this mean?" Father Ambrose said. "It looks like a diagram, not a message. There are two lines—"

"Why!" Aubrey exclaimed, "the two parallel lines have met, without awaiting infinity."

Professor Bassermann laughed. "How credulous both of you are, my friend! A bit of trickery characteristic of Isaac Laquedem. This is no telegraph blank."

The others looked closely. Everything was erased—except in the corner a water mark that looked like a tortoise.

"Why do you think it is a piece of trickery, Professor?" Aubrey asked.

"It is not an ordinary telegram," Father Ambrose admitted. "But how could the message have reached him?"

"Some more hocus-pocus," Professor Bassermann snorted. "I think this other telegram is a real one which he did not mean to leave behind him. It is signed Nicolai Lenin, sent from Moscow. The language is a corruption of Sanskrit. If I read aright it says: 'All is ready. Come. The red dawn is rising.'"

"I was right all along. Isaac Laquedem is a Russian revolutionist! This is the Lenin to whom he referred last night."

"And the shoes?" Father Ambrose asked.

"A clownish trick!"

"Do you mean to say, Professor, that our analysis was absolutely futile, that he only made believe—"

"No, no, Aubrey. He revealed himself in his analysis when he told us his dreams and his daydreams. He retold the history of the world as it reflects itself in one man's mind. His story is an erotic interpretation of history. There is nothing in his recital that any educated man could not distill from his reading. His memory is nothing to brag of. Isaac Laquedem is undoubtedly a thinker and a remarkably well-read man, but he is also a charlatan and an adventurer."

"I do not think," Father Ambrose insisted, "that you

can explain Isaac Laquedem in terms of the laboratory or of empiric psychology. Too many occult events are associated both with his coming and with his going."

"I," Aubrey remarked, "am convinced that Isaac Laquedem has lived nearly two thousand years, and that, except for obvious lapses and exaggerations, his story is true."

"How can you reconcile that supposition with your scientific conscience?" Professor Bassermann derisively asked.

"He himself supplies the clue to the mystery," replied Aubrey Lowell. "Isaac Laquedem suffered a severe psychological shock on his way to the crucifixion of Jesus. The shock mysteriously disarrayed his metabolism. It overstimulated his glands to such an extent that they were able to completely eliminate the by-product of life, the waste which, accumulating in the channels of our body, produces old age and death. Death, I am convinced, is not a biological necessity. The experiments of Carrel have established that tissue may renew itself indefinitely."

"He has," Professor Bassermann growled, "established only the immortality of the chicken heart! How do you explain the inaccuracies and anachronisms with which Laquedem's tale abounds? He confuses historical characters and juggles with time. I doubt if he could pass a college entrance examination in history!"

"Probably not," Aubrey remarked. "Laquedem is as human as we are. His brain is subject to the same errors as ours. His recollections are colored by his own personality. It takes two years to perform an ordinary analysis. It would take fifty years to analyze Laquedem in such a way as to unravel all the complexes which constitute his personality and to eliminate from his recollections the factor of human error. What is your opinion of our experiment, Father?"

"I agree with you that Isaac Laquedem told the truth. He is indeed the Wandering Jew. I cannot tell how God wrought the miracle, but it is a miracle. By every sign and token he, Isaac Laquedem, is Ahasuerus."

"Nonsense," Bassermann exclaimed irritably, "he is a Russian conspirator."

"Have you forgotten the sudden storm on his arrival? Do you recall the seven plovers and the broken bell? Don't you remember how the wounds of the Crucified

reopened when he entered the room? He is unquestionably the Wandering Jew."

"Fiddlesticks," Bassermann thundered. "He is a Russian spy!"

"I am inclined to agree with Father Ambrose," Aubrey replied, "without accepting his supernatural implications. But if we are right, if he is the Wandering Jew, do you know what we have done? We have killed him. We have condemned him to death!"

"Killed him?" the other two added.

"Having traced the shock—the trauma of the psychologists—to its origin, we have broken the spell. The long chain snaps. The glands are restored to their normal function. The hypnotic command is dissolved. The curse, if it is a curse, is lifted. Henceforth Isaac Laquedem is like other mortals. His glands will function like ours. We have cured him. If our cure is effective, the patient will die."

"No, my son, he will live on until Jesus returns. 'Tarry thou till I come.' Isaac Laquedem can find no peace until the Savior returns to judge the quick and the dead."

Father Ambrose made the sign of the cross.

"Whatever our final judgment may be," Aubrey said, "we have conducted a phenomenal investigation."

"That is no doubt true," Basserman said. "Laquedem's analysis constitutes a complete mental chart of civilized man."

"The world will be startled when we print our notes."

"Startled and probably angered," Bassermann added, rubbing his hands. "The story must be told backwards, or rather, it must be unfolded from the beginning. Isaac Laquedem told his life from maturity to youth. We must begin with his youth and carry his life forward from its beginning to where it ends."

"If it ends," softly remarked Father Ambrose.

"Perhaps you are right," Aubrey said. "His story can never end. The life of Isaac Laquedem is the history of human passion."

"Will the censor permit you to tell his story?" Father Ambrose remarked. "I hear that policemen in Boston and the Postmaster General in Washington are the arbiters of literature and morals in the United States."

"We cannot destroy this most remarkable record in the history of psychology in deference to vulgar prudery,"

Aubrey replied. "However bizarre Isaac Laquedem's adventures may be, however curious the bypaths of his sensations, however exotic the labyrinths of his passion, there is nothing in his story that does not lurk somewhere in the subconscious of every one of us. His experiences are purely human. *Nihil humanum*—nothing human is alien to him!"

"I am less afraid," Professor Bassermann remarked, "of the moralists than of religious zealots who may consider the confessions of Isaac Laquedem an attack upon all religion."

"Only," Father Ambrose interjected gravely, "if they do not read his confessions in their entirety. Every phase in his development is but a link in a chain. It may be the chain between man and God. Both mystic and rationalist will find in Laquedem's confession the confirmation of their convictions."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of three monks, pale and tottering.

"These are the watchmen," Father Ambrose remarked. "Now we shall hear how Isaac Laquedem escaped."

The monks seemed to be unable to speak articulately.

Professor Bassermann looked into their eyes.

"These men are hypnotized," he exclaimed. "It was thus that the Russian spy managed to get away."

"This proves my contention. He *is* the Wandering Jew," Father Ambrose asserted heatedly. "No one but a person with extraordinary psychic powers can hypnotize three men simultaneously. He has repeated for us the feat which freed him from the claws of the Inquisition. The Lord has given him supernatural powers to extricate himself from his predicaments that he may continue his pilgrimage unhindered."

The three men walked slowly toward the monastery. Their shadows mingled as if the three great divisions of human thought, absolute faith, absolute denial and pragmatic acceptance, were at last reconciled. . . .

The sun, rising from the Aegean, hurled spears of fire at the golden cross gleaming undimmed and undaunted on the marble peak of Mount Athos.

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